

*An Alternative Mediterranean Space.*  
*Narratives of Movement and Resistance*  
*Across Italy and North Africa*

A Dissertation

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*An Alternative Mediterranean Space.*  
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Through a comparative analysis of contemporary literary and visual narratives that dialogue across the Mediterranean Sea, in this dissertation I apply the category of narrative to the field of Mediterranean Studies. Working across different genres, different media, and different languages, I explore the possible configuration of a Mediterranean narrative that would take into account the multiple articulations of a real and imaginary Mediterranean space. I focus on alternative narratives of migration, of the interconnection between land and sea, and of the desert, through a comparative reading of Italian literary works by Paolo Rumiz and Lina Prosa, Libyan novels by Ibrahim Al-Koni and Razan Moghrabi, video installations by the French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira, and a short story by the Lebanese writer Emily Nasrallah.

How can these narratives of and in the Mediterranean help us understand the ways in which the contemporary Mediterranean is experienced, and the role it might have to play within the current dynamics of globalization? In this dissertation, I argue that the two dimensions of living and narrating the Mediterranean cannot be separated, but that they are, rather, intimately interconnected. I show that Mediterranean narratives can provide alternative ways of thinking, conceptualizing, and ultimately experiencing the Mediterranean, both within its permeable and porous boundaries and beyond that, in the space of the global world.

The narratives I put in dialogue with each other counteract a mainstream narrative of the Mediterranean as backward and immobile, when compared to Northern Europe, and as a conflict zone and a barrier, which separates Europe from the threatening Arab world. Thus, these narratives all respond to Iain Chambers's call for "dissonant" narratives, whose "disturbing" voices are able to create the Mediterranean as a postcolonial space of agency and resistance, where alternative modernities can also be imagined.

The Mediterranean that ultimately emerges from the interaction of its narrative voices is a dialogic space of differences that, while retaining their own specificities, "encounter" each other without necessarily melding. In the dichotomy that globalization proclaims between assimilation and proliferation of difference, alternative Mediterranean narratives occupy, and create, an in-between space, suspended in its unresolved, and potential, condition of liminality.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Silvia Caserta holds a B.A. degree in Classics and an M.A. degree in Italian Literature and Culture from the University of Pisa, Italy. Before coming to Cornell, Silvia obtained her first Ph.D. in 2013 from the University of Macerata, Italy, with a dissertation focused on Italian colonial travel writing.

*To Sofia and Lino*

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## Introduction

... *Qui pure*  
- *penso - è Mediterraneo. E il mio pensiero*  
    *all'azzurro s'inebria di quel nome.*  
    *(Here too*  
- *I think - it's the Mediterranean. And my thoughts*  
    *in the blue become inebriated with that name.)*  
Umberto Saba, *Ebbri Canti*

### The Mediterranean as a Field of Study

The geopolitical space of the Mediterranean that we commonly refer to, and that is at the forefront of contemporary discourse concerning the urgent issues of migration, terrorism, and integration, is a geo-historical and cultural construction that arises from European colonialisms and the processes of decolonization. In his study of the meaning of a geopolitical and socio-cultural definition of the Mediterranean, Salvatore Bono highlights how the first clear acknowledgment of the Mediterranean as a unitary entity dates back to Napoleon's Egyptian campaign. It is at that time, as the Italian historian points out, that the Mediterranean becomes a site of confrontation, and clash, among the various European nation-states.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the conflicts generated by the European scramble for Africa rapidly sweep away Michel Chevalier's project of a Mediterranean economic and cultural "system," which would promote peace and cooperation among the different Mediterranean countries.<sup>2</sup> And yet, the colonial ideology of Italy in particular, but also of France and Spain to a certain extent, rests upon, and reinforces, the idea of a supposed unity of the Mediterranean, which each country's colonial efforts were intended to reassert. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Fernand Braudel's fundamental study of the Mediterranean from the perspective of its historical *longue durée*

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<sup>1</sup> See Bono 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See Michel Chevalier. *Le système de la Méditerranée* (1832)

significantly contributes to reaffirming, and circulating, a conception of the Mediterranean as a unified space.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Mediterranean as a distinct field of study develops only after the end of the Second World War, at a time in which, in the geopolitical context of the Cold War, Anglo-American anthropology looks at the area with increasing interest and curiosity.<sup>4</sup> As the Italian scholar Adelina Miranda remarks in her *Introduction* to a collection of essays on Mediterranean anthropology, the Mediterranean solicits an anthropological perspective as a “spazio di ‘coesistenze contraddittorie:’ area colonizzatrice e colonizzata; area da conquistare o da convertire; area da attraversare e da conoscere; area di invenzione e di adattamento.”<sup>5</sup> (Miranda 10) At the same time, Anglo-American anthropology seems to largely, and rapidly, gloss over Mediterranean internal contradictions, through the insistence on supposed “common values” that Mediterranean countries would share, which are different and opposed to those of Northern Europe.<sup>6</sup> The risk of “Mediterraneism,” a term coined by the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld in 2005 to describe the doctrine that assigns common inherent and distinctive characteristics to the cultures of the Mediterranean, are already implicit in this post-war approach to the study of the area.

In the context of the gradual shift – in terms of disciplinary boundaries – from Area Studies to Global Studies that has arisen from the fall of the Berlin wall (and that has become more rapid in the last decades), it is interesting to note that Mediterranean Studies seem to have followed a different path. Conceived as a field that aims to address from various perspectives

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<sup>3</sup> See Braudel 1949. For a different, but also related, conception of the Mediterranean as a unified entity, which also significantly emerged during the Second World War, see also Albert Camus’ well-known lecture “La Nouvelle Culture méditerranéenne.”

<sup>4</sup> See Albera 1999.

<sup>5</sup> “a space of ‘contradictory coexistences:’ a colonizing and colonized area; an area to conquer or to convert; an area to cross and to learn about; an area of invention and adjustment.” See Blok, Bomberger, Miranda, Albera, and Signorelli. *Antropologia Del Mediterraneo*, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Peristiany’s well-known study (1966), which focuses on women’s segregation and the honor and shame complex as inherently Mediterranean traits.

the main problems this geo-historical area has been facing, and to re-contextualize the meaning of the area itself in the larger contemporary world, Mediterranean Studies have been flourishing in the last decades. Thus, the Mediterranean, both as a crossroads of economic and cultural exchanges and as a site of endless contamination and conflict, remains today a fundamental and strategic area of inquiry and research. As John Watkins notes,

the Mediterranean has acquired a new visibility, even urgency, in universities' efforts to balance regional expertise against a global awareness of connectivities. [...] We can talk about it as a single region with a common environment and a long stretch of common history. But we can also talk about it as a paradigm for the modern world at large, which we now speak of as a global system of diverse but increasingly interconnected societies. (Watkins 151)

Although I do not necessarily share Watkins' enthusiasm regarding a supposed convergence of interests, and possibly methodologies, between Mediterranean Studies and Global Studies,<sup>7</sup> it is certainly true that Mediterranean Studies are currently attracting growing attention and broadening their perspectives. This continuous and renewed critical interest in the Mediterranean has to do, certainly, with the peculiarity of the area itself. Contrary to the "land-centric" approach that informs most examples of Area Studies, Mediterranean Studies (like Pacific or Atlantic Studies) focus primarily on the space of the sea, which is conceived as a border and a barrier, but also a liquid space, which as such is inevitably characterized by

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<sup>7</sup> On the risks, and challenges, that Global Studies need to face, see for instance Brennan 2004 and Gikandi 2006.

movement and permeability.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the Mediterranean has been positively valued, and addressed, in its resonance with the category of the “global South,” where the Mediterranean itself, in Franco Cassano’s *Southern Thought*, comes to the forefront as an alternative space to Northern Europe.<sup>9</sup>

Cassano’s stark opposition between North and South runs the risk of activating a new version of mediterraneism, where the Mediterranean as South would necessarily acquire distinctive and definitive features.<sup>10</sup> Mediterranean Studies, then, might fall in the same traps that await any other kinds of “regional studies,” where, in Dainotto’s terms, if nationalism is still seen as an imposition of the “imagined community,” regionalism “rises as an alternative to such imagined – let alone imposed – colonial identity.” (Dainotto 7) Instead of being seen as a homogenous whole that would preserve traditional roots of culture, free from internal challenges and contradictions, the Mediterranean region can still provide a useful framework of analysis if it can rather preserve, and value, its position in-between the regional and the global, or maybe reveal itself to be both at the same time. Again in Dainotto’s words, then, “la sfida [...] è quella di sottrarre il Mediterraneo al liquefarsi di ogni alternativa; di ri-teorizzare il Mediterraneo come resistenza – come organo solido, non molecole fluide, che resiste a una globalizzazione che, per quanto cerca di immaginarsi indipendente dal locale e dal territorio, rimane sempre vincolata a questi.”<sup>11</sup> (Dainotto 10) A site of encounter between North and South, but also between its Western and Eastern shores, and an interface between three different continents, the Mediterranean region, whose liquidity does not necessarily mean flatness, can be a fruitful area from which to investigate the contradictions of the contemporary global world.

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<sup>8</sup> For a retracing of the long theoretical juxtaposition between land and sea, from Schmitt’s seminal essay up to the Italian geo-philosophy, see Cocco and Dimpflmeier. *I Confini nel Mare*, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> See Cassano 1996, and Cassano and Zolo 2007.

<sup>10</sup> See Giaccaria and Minca 2010.

<sup>11</sup> “the challenge [...] is to take the Mediterranean out of the liquefying of any alternative; to re-theorize the Mediterranean as resistance – as a solid organ, and not just fluid molecules, which resists a globalization that, even when it tries to imagine itself as independent of the local and the territorial, still remains bound by it.”

### A Narrative Perspective on the Contemporary Mediterranean

The continuous, and growing, scholarly interest in the Mediterranean I just discussed has involved some disciplines more than others. Anthropological studies of the Mediterranean have never faded, and various historians have followed Braudel's pioneering research in the attempt to retrace a history of the Mediterranean basin.<sup>12</sup> A literary perspective, however, has come late into the field, and still struggles to get visibility and recognition.

At the same time, it is important to note that the main anthropological and socio-historical perspective on the Mediterranean does not seem to include in its scope the more recent and contemporary articulations of the Mediterranean itself. In Horden and Purcell's words, "the Mediterranean region as a distinct whole is not the indispensable framework within which to conceptualize the very recent history and likely futures of its people." (Horden and Purcell 3) The two historians acknowledge that various factors – such as emigration, internal migration, environmental degradation, and terrorism – have irremediably changed the distinctiveness of the ancient and modern Mediterranean, to the point that they recognize a shift towards the end of history of the area. In other words, the socio-political chaos of the contemporary (post-)Mediterranean has lost, from a historical point of view, its connections with the ancient Mediterranean, understood as a cradle of civilization and a socio-cultural unity.

The delay with which a literary perspective on the Mediterranean has been developing has certainly to do, as Suzanne Akbari notes in her *Introduction* to the edited volume *The Sea of Languages. Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, with the specific organization of literary disciplines, and their broader difficulty to adjust to a new globalized dimension. If, in this context, the emergence of World Literature has to be seen precisely as the

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<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, the renewed anthropological perspectives in Bromberger 2006 and Albera 2006, or the equally recent historical works on the Mediterranean by Horden and Purcell (2006) and Abulafia (2011).

attempt, on behalf of literary studies, to cope with the global development of human and social sciences, what would a category of Mediterranean literature mean, and entail? A Mediterranean perspective on literature implies the need to pay attention and give voice to the interaction of different literatures within the Mediterranean basin, where the very power, and literary value, of these literatures is at stake. Thus, as the title of the volume I just mentioned suggests, any renewed conception of a literature in and of the Mediterranean should come from a reconsideration of the role of Arabic literature within the whole Mediterranean area.

Although Akbari's perspective again focuses on the medieval Mediterranean, the past here is not conceived, as in the historical works I previously referred to, in antithesis to a present that is impossible to take into account. Rather, the medieval Mediterranean that emerges throughout the volume is recovered in order to be, more or less explicitly, a possible model for the present. In the essay that closes the volume, Karla Mallette highlights the coexistence of multiple languages and the play between linguistic systems as the most distinctive, and valuable, feature of a medieval literary Mediterranean, whose complex dimension preludes to the further complexity of the contemporary literary and linguistic Mediterranean.

In this dissertation, I respond to Mallette's call for a literary perspective on the Mediterranean that would be capable of "kneading together the sea's dissonant shores," (Mallette 263) and I extend her new philology not only to contemporary texts, but also, and more broadly, to different contemporary cultural expressions. For this reason, I substitute the category of Mediterranean literature with a wider, but also somehow more specific, category of narrative, as I move from a strictly textual perspective to include the different ways in which the Mediterranean gets narrated across its shores. Mediterranean narratives themselves, then, rather than the seashores, are "dissonant," insofar as, in Chamber's terms, they both respond to each other and counteract mainstream narratives of the Mediterranean itself.

The Mediterranean that emerges from my comparative analysis of literary and visual works is not essentialist in any possible way. I do not define the narratives I focus on as Mediterranean because they share a series of fixed characteristics that would “represent” and define the area. Rather, Mediterranean narratives create the Mediterranean itself as a site of encounters, a space of “dialogic differences,” of polyphony, in Bakhtin’s terms. For their project “*Représentations de la Méditerranée*,” Thierry Fabre and Robert Ilbert aim to explore different representations of the Mediterranean collected across its shores, in order to derive a “common view” of the Mediterranean itself as both a real and an imaginary space. My project is rather different, as I intend to focus on the very contradictions that emerge from a “contrapuntal” reading of Mediterranean works, where different perspectives, within the individual works and from one work to the other, resonate with, and deviate from, each other.

Thus, the aim that sustains my research project is not necessarily to define what a Mediterranean narrative is, or what a category of Mediterranean narrative might, or should, look like. Instead, the main question that my dissertation pursues is what the category itself might add to our understanding of the contemporary Mediterranean. Mediterranean narratives, I believe, can ultimately help us interrogate, and problematize, our own assumptions about what the Mediterranean itself is, and how we should approach it, and live in it, today.

### Italy and the Mediterranean

As I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, the Mediterranean that keeps attracting scholars’ attention from a variety of perspectives is a product of colonialism, and has developed its present shape in parallel with the process of decolonization. As my own interest in the Mediterranean has emerged from a previous research project on Italian colonialism, and on its controversial memory in particular, the significance of colonial legacies still informs my



investigation, and my understanding, of the contemporary Mediterranean space. In this perspective, the comparative approach of the dissertation aims to challenge the constructed monoculturalism of postcolonial Italy, in line with scholars who have been recently rejecting the myth of Italy as a homogenous society.<sup>13</sup> The Mediterranean framework, more specifically, allows me to open Italian contemporary literature and culture to a dialogue with those of the Arab world, and with literature coming from Libya in particular, to which Italy is inextricably tied both by its colonial past and by the urgency of the current migration crisis.

Reflecting upon the limits of a Mediterranean Studies field that, as I pointed out, has long been “the province of classical archaeologists as well as of historians of Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” (Fogu 2) Claudio Fogu denounces scholars’ “blindness to the cultural construction of Mediterranean-ness as a quintessentially modern phenomenon, and to the central role that Italy has played as both subject and agent of this construction.” (Fogu 5) The peculiar geographical and ideological position of Italy within the real and the imaginary Mediterranean space makes it a strategic starting point from which to address the contemporary Mediterranean as a whole. The double-sided articulation of the Mediterranean category has significantly contributed to shaping, while also constantly redefining, Italian identity. The Mediterranean element of this identity has undoubtedly served Italian ideological justification for imperialist and colonial projects, where, by stressing the continuity of the ancient Roman *mare nostrum*, Italy has long affirmed its own cultural and political role in the world. On the other hand, the discourse on the Mediterranean affects, while also being effected by, both the Italian internal dialectic between North and South, and Italy’s self-positioning in between North (Europe) and South (Mediterranean). As Chambers notes, at the very time “of rampant nationalism and European expansion, the distinction between Italy as an emerging modern

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<sup>13</sup> See Andall and Duncan 2010; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012.

European state and the bucolic backwardness of its Mediterranean inheritance was inevitably reinforced.” (Chambers 3) In other words, even at the time of Italian colonial expansion, when the continuity with the ancient Roman Empire was displayed as the determining ideological force, the Mediterranean affiliation was a double-edged sword.

The “Mediterranean inheritance,” thus, is constantly renegotiated within Italy, being alternatively used to reinforce national cohesion or, on the contrary, to highlight the fragmentation within the nation. In his contribution to the collection *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, William Harris, while discussing the different reasons local people have to invoke a certain shared Mediterranean identity, reveals how for many of these people the Mediterranean identity might just be a trap, since “by conforming to a model of Mediterranean peoples as unreliable, imprecise and spontaneous [...] they are also providing both an excuse for their own failures in the larger spheres of competition and an excuse for others to despise them.” (Harris 57) According to the historian, this way of claiming a Mediterranean identity by means of creating and reproducing self-stereotypes is characteristic of the Greeks, while it gets a peculiar articulation in the Italian case: “For them, inhabitants of culturally and linguistically more fractured land, there is less reason to invoke the stereotype at the national level.” (Harris 57) However, the stereotype works well within the national borders, where, “with an odd mixture of envy and contempt,” (Harris 58) Romans might invoke their Mediterranean-ness as a means of distinction from their Milanese countrymen. Harris’ observations, and his comparison between the Italian and the Greek situation, further show how the Mediterranean identity within Italy has contributed to creating, while currently maintaining, the existence of a north/south barrier.

At the same time, this north/south divide works beyond the national borders. In this respect, Italy seems to be constantly striving to reconcile its northern affiliation with Europe

with the southern character of its Mediterranean identity. This struggle is not only evident at the level of current foreign policy, where Italy faces the constant dilemma between following Europe or turning towards the Mediterranean, but it also works at a broader cultural and ideological level. In *Southern Thought*, Franco Cassano explicitly confronts Herzfeld's conception of Mediterraneanism, while denouncing how, in the latter's Atlantic perspective, the South is seen as an incomplete North, a North to be. In this configuration, then, the Mediterranean as a whole is only a defective Europe, maybe appealing to mass tourism, but also (or maybe because) primitive and backward. Cassano's solution of actively "embracing the South" advocates Italy's conscious re-appropriation of its Mediterranean identity, which requires an act of resistance to the definition, and self-definition, of Italy only in opposition to the European North.

How could Italy reclaim her own Mediterranean-ness, and what would such a renewed acknowledgment mean for Italy itself, and for its relation with other Mediterranean countries? The challenge that Italy needs to face is, again in Fogu's words, to turn *Mare Nostrum* into a *Mare Aliorum*, opening its own shores to the influences of other cultures, which ultimately permeate Italian identity within its own borders. Mediterranean narratives can play a key role in this effort, as narrative itself creates hybridity within contemporary Italian culture, while also reinforcing the porosity of borders within the whole space of the Mediterranean.

### Mediterranean Narratives

As I noted earlier, the narratives I focus on in the dissertation do not have either thematic or formal similarities that, alone, would specifically qualify them as "Mediterranean." Rather, the works I analyze create a bridge among the different shores of the Mediterranean, as a core of Italian texts enters into conversation not only with Libyan texts, but also with a Lebanese text

and with French-Algerian art. Moreover, the literary works belong to different genres, as I move across travel writing, the novel, the short story, and drama. At the same time, these literary works are not the exclusive focus of my research project, which extends beyond the literary medium, and also includes visual narratives of contemporary video art. Finally, the disparate Mediterranean origins of the various works necessarily imply a multi-lingual perspective on the Mediterranean itself. I read the Arabic texts either in their Italian or in their English translation, where the practice of translation itself bears witness to contemporary efforts, and challenges, to enhance communication among different cultures within the Mediterranean basin.<sup>14</sup>

Although mostly divergent in form, medium, and language, the works I include in the dissertation still resonate with one another, as they all ultimately point towards alternative ways of conceptualizing the Mediterranean. They are all performative narratives, as they both narrate and create the Mediterranean as a postcolonial sea of agency and resistance, where an alternative Mediterranean modernity can and must be envisioned. They are polyphonic narratives, in Bakhtin's own conceptualization of the term, as their internal narrative movement is created and sustained by the coming together of different voices. They are all, in a way, travel narratives, with the narrators both living and narrating their own journeys at the same time, in a simultaneity of living and narrating that extend to the whole conception of the Mediterranean space the works put forward. Finally, while they are all contemporary narratives from a "temporal" point of view, they are also all contemporary in Agamben's terms, as they do not precisely "coincide" with their own time. Not only do they maintain a critical distance from the present, which allows them to see the contradictions of this very present they narrate, but they also constantly aim to restore the link between this present and the past, and to address its

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<sup>14</sup> For the role of translation in postcolonial contexts see Bertacco 2014.

potentiality for the future. In other words, the narrative simultaneity also retains a diachronic dimension, where the Mediterranean emerges in its spatial and temporal density.

The narrative works I chose revolve around three main nuclei, namely migration, the relationship between land and sea, and the desert, which determine the structure of this dissertation. In this sense, the dissertation itself is somehow performative, as it creates a movement across the different chapters that is parallel to the movement the narratives address within the Mediterranean space itself. In other words, the chapters within the dissertation also move from the space of the sea to the space of interaction between land and sea, while focusing in the end on the space of the land. The first chapter addresses a condition of movement across the opposite shores of the sea, from one land to the other. In contemporary narratives of the migratory middle passage, this movement occurs within the space of the sea itself, on the boat that might, or might not, reach the shore. The second chapter further addresses this movement within the very space of the sea, where, however, sea and land constantly interact and affect each other, as in the space of the island. Finally, in the third chapter I explore Mediterranean movement as it occurs within the space of the land, and more specifically within the desert's land of the Sahara. All these spaces, which in Chambers' words are both "transitory and zones of transit," (Chambers 5) ultimately emerge as in-between spaces of suspension, defined by movement itself and the constant changes and negotiations it requires.

The first chapter focuses on the Mediterranean narrative of migration, through a comparative reading of the play *Lampedusa Beach*, by Sicilian author Lina Prosa, and Razan Moghrabi's Libyan novel *Women of the Wind*. I define both works as "alternative" narratives of migration, insofar as they depart from, and counteract, a mainstream narrative of the phenomenon of migration itself. Whereas contemporary media tend to portray migrants as anonymous and defenseless victims of crimes no one is ultimately responsible for, Prosa's and

Moghrabi's narratives recover the complex dimension of the phenomenon, while also restoring the migrants' real and narrative agency within it.

In Prosa's play, the African female character Shauba experiences, and narrates at the same time, her Mediterranean middle passage, whose tragic epilogue the play can only allude to. Within the space of the sea, and on the heterotopic space of the boat on which the woman's journey takes place, Shauba creates the space of her narrative resistance, even beyond the physical annihilation of her own death. Within the complex narrative structure of Moghrabi's novel, in which the various "women of the wind" interact with each other through the alternation of different points of view and narrative voices, the story of Bahija's Mediterranean middle passage emerges. The Moroccan woman also lives and narrates her sea journey at the same time, and the narrative dimension is what ultimately sustains, and somehow creates, the woman's experience of migration itself. In both works, the present moment of the journey does not erase the past, but restores instead a connection to it, where the past inevitably brings about the specters of colonialism. At the same time, a possibility for a Mediterranean future arises both from Shauba's suspended journey and from Bahija's uncertain landing on the opposite seashore.

In the second chapter, I enlarge the category of Mediterranean narrative so as to comprise not just dramatic works – as in the previous chapter – but also visual art. In particular, I focus on the complex interrelation between land and sea within the Mediterranean space, as it emerges in Italian writer Paolo Rumiz's book *The Cyclops* and in video installations by French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira. Rumiz's and Sedira's works resonate with each other as they both explore the sea, and the lands it comprises, as polyphonic sites of endless possibilities and contradictions. Moreover, the real and narrative space of the lighthouse, which is both the *Cyclops* of Rumiz's narrative and the protagonist of one of Sedira's works I analyze,

materializes as the ultimate bastion of resistance against the threats of immobility and annihilation that globalization carries.

Within the apparent immobility of an island at the supposed center of the Mediterranean, Rumiz's narrative journey recovers the movement of resistance that the very space of the island, and the specific space of the lighthouse within it, constantly performs. In the continuous re-negotiation of its position within the larger – Mediterranean and global – world, Rumiz's narrative island subverts dichotomies of tradition and modernity, local and global, center and periphery, while also creating a Mediterranean space of coexistence between humans and non-humans.

In her transition from photography to video art, Sedira develops her own artistic form of narrativity. In her three-part installation *Floating Coffins*, the polyphonic and simultaneous movement of the videos manages to convey a non-linear and fragmented narrative of the Mediterranean itself, suggesting the complexity of a Mediterranean condition that cannot be reduced to a single root. If movement in *Saphir* occurs only within the land, on the liminal space of the seashores, but also across the multiple screens of the installation, *Middle Sea* fully realizes the potentiality of movement within the space of the video itself, as the single screen focuses on a ship sailing on the sea, with a significant decentralization of the human figure. After the affirmative gesture of *Middle Sea*, the last piece of the trilogy presents what Le Feuvre calls “an image of the end of the world,” (Le Feuvre 46) where humans give way to rusty boats and screaming birds. However, Sedira's camera opens this apparent end of the world “to itself, to its possibility of world,” (Nancy 93) so as to create a Mediterranean narrative of hope and resistance.

Finally, the third chapter explores the desert narrative through the analysis of Al-Koni's novel *The Bleeding of the Stone*, which I read in parallel with the author's previous novel *Gold*

*Dust* and the short story *The Desert*, by Lebanese writer Emily Nasrallah. In all three works, the Sahara desert emerges as a Mediterranean space, counter but also parallel to the space of the sea that dominates the two previous chapters. Not only is Al-Koni's and Nasrallah's desert characterized by endless movement and change, but it is also an in-between space of liminality and suspension, where alternative communities can be imagined. Like the space of the sea in the first two chapters, the desert is both real and imaginary, a threatened ecological entity that is not, however, either helpless or simply immobile in a stubborn defense of tradition. It is not a flat and timeless space, but rather a space whose rhizomatic movement challenges normative conceptualizations of modernity and progress. The narrative desert that Al-Koni and Nasrallah create in their works acknowledges the threats that emerge from within its own space, and calls for a movement of resistance that relies on a shared effort between humans and non-humans.

The works I just introduced come from different shores of the Mediterranean, and inevitably also position themselves within different literary, or more broadly cultural, traditions. Moreover, even though they ultimately share, and intend to put forward, a renewed conception of the Mediterranean space I already alluded to (and which will become more evident through the development of the dissertation), they also address different aspects, and focus on different issues, within the Mediterranean space they all belong to. However, their coming together within the space of the dissertation allows for the emergence of a shared narrative dimensions of the Mediterranean itself. These works create a narrative that spans simultaneously across different temporalities, and where the time of writing and narrating the Mediterranean coexists with the time of experiencing it. It is a narrative that, while inevitably rooted in the Mediterranean colonial past, also powerfully addresses the Mediterranean present and post-colonial condition, ultimately pointing towards a Mediterranean future yet to be imagined. It is a narrative that posits the importance of reimagining the human in its relationship with the non-



human, and the necessity of envisioning new kinds of communities. Finally, it is a narrative of openness, instability, change, and movement, and, as such, it shares with the sea, the desert, and the Mediterranean as a whole its most (un)distinctive characteristics.

## Chapter One

### Narrative of Migration

*How a history is told is as important  
as what is being told.*  
Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History*

The dimension of movement, and more specifically the mobility of people across the sea and its different shores, has long characterized the Mediterranean as a geographical and cultural space, while also determining its “*longue durée*” as a network of multiple routes and exchanges. The historical and geographical scholarship on the Mediterranean has widely documented, addressed, and explained this endemic phenomenon of Mediterranean mobility, variously following Fernand Braudel’s first assertion that “the whole Mediterranean consists of movement in space.” (Braudel 276) Opening the Mediterranean to the broader world, the historian David Abulafia highlights how in the Mediterranean, as in many other examples of “middle-seas,” the water creates links between different economies, cultures, and religions. At the same time, he reaffirms the specificity of a Mediterranean movement that the sea itself, as a group of different but interconnected seas, has created and supported since ancient times.<sup>1</sup> As Braudel once again suggests, mobility in the Mediterranean does not only happen in the space of the sea, it extends to the land as well. The phenomena of transhumance and nomadism, which the French historian describes as two of the most distinctive characteristics of the Mediterranean world, testify to the centrality of movement on and across the whole Mediterranean sea-landscape.

It is interesting to note, however, that the unity of the Mediterranean, which in the geo-historical analyses I have referred to is consistent with movement in the Mediterranean space, is

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<sup>1</sup> See Abulafia 2011.

not, and cannot be easily extended to the contemporary period. Neither Horden and Purcell's monumental study of the Mediterranean, which aims to build on the Braudelian Mediterranean while somehow "purifying" it from its supposed geographical determinism, nor Abulafia's work seem to be able to address the unity, and the interrelated mobility, of the modern and contemporary Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> The supposed unity of the Mediterranean world is undoubtedly a complex, if not problematic, feature of the current Mediterranean, and as such constantly debatable and debated.<sup>3</sup> However, movement in the Mediterranean is, although not less complex, at least a self-evident dimension, as it materializes in the current phenomenon of migration.

As Arjun Appadurai argued in his seminal study on globalization, migration is the fundamental cultural dimension of the globalized world. In the thought of the social-cultural anthropologist, the phenomenon of migration needs to be analyzed in parallel to the emergence of the new media, conceived and investigated as the other most defining factor of today's global world: "The story of mass migration (voluntary and forced) is hardly a new feature of human history. But when it is juxtaposed with the rapid flow of mass-mediated images, scripts, and sensations, we have a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities." (Appadurai 4) Within the specific Mediterranean context, the deep and profoundly problematic interaction of these two dimensions – namely population migrations and media – becomes crucial, insofar as the very issue of migration gets constantly addressed, experienced, and ultimately judged through its representation in the media. Projected on a flat screen, the complex reality of migration gets necessarily oversimplified and reduced to a unilateral

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<sup>2</sup> See Horden and Purcell 2000. Even though David Abulafia claims to be able to show how the unity of the Mediterranean extends all the way to our age of globalization, he devotes to this task only the last chapter of his book, in which, however, as Claudio Fogu argues, "the coherence of the enterprise falters." (Fogu 5)

<sup>3</sup> In this respect, it is enough to think of Samuel Huntington's influential thesis of the "clash of civilizations," according to which three very different civilizations "clash" in the Mediterranean area. See Huntington 1996.

narrative, which dwells in the status of migrants as victims, leaving no space for imagining counter-hegemonic representations of human mobility.<sup>4</sup> In turn, the hegemonic and obsessively pervasive narrative of the mainstream media profoundly affects the common imaginary of, and the related reactions to, the phenomenon of migration itself. In the postmodern compression of time and space, where stories tend to be reduced to images for immediate and unmediated consumption, Susan Sontag's call for an "ecology of images" (Sontag 1977: 180) is destined to remain unheard. On the contrary, media increasingly rely on what the scholar calls the "exploitation of sentiment," (Sontag 2003: 80) to the point that the migrants' "victim status can be presented as inevitable and we as news consumers become alienated, inattentive, disinterested." (Broderick and Traverso 238)

This dominant narrative of migration, which is a narrative of desperation, criminalization, and victimization, can and needs to be counter-acted. The very phenomenon of migration, if approached from a Mediterranean framework that would take into account the porous borders of the area, seen, in Iain Chambers' powerful formulation, as "both transitory and zones of transit," (Chambers 2008: 5) can allow us to rethink and elaborate an alternative conception of the Mediterranean as a whole. Cinematic, literary, and artistic works can create what Chambers, again, calls "dissonant narratives" that complicate the dominant narrative of migration, restoring its complex and multidimensional character, which rejects stability and refuses easy categorizations.

In this chapter, I focus on two different, but also complementary examples of counter-narratives of migration. In the two literary works I analyze, the Mediterranean passage can only be experienced and made sense of through a narration that coincides with it, and transcends it at the same time. Both works, in other words, move from the apparent repetition, and

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<sup>4</sup> For a problematization of the interrelation between visibility and migrancy see Bayraktar 2016.

reaffirmation, of a normative and standard narrative of the Mediterranean passage only to ultimately subvert and undo it. In the Italian play *Lampedusa Beach* by Lina Prosa, the narrative of a young African woman's dramatic attempt to migrate is able to propose an alternative Mediterranean as a generative space of critique and resistance. Razan Moghrabi's Libyan novel *Women of the Wind* creates a narrative space in which the interaction of different female voices annihilate the possibility of any unilateral perspective on migration, so that the phenomenon of migration itself gets diffracted into its multiple layers. Both works, while affirming the ultimate coincidence of living and narrating the Mediterranean, frame a single event of migration into a much larger narrative of agency and resistance. The Mediterranean that emerges from these works in turn recovers, from the very act of narration, the complexity of both its real and its imaginary space.

### Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Migration

In 2013, Mariangela Palladino describes Mediterranean migration as still “a peripheral phenomenon within European consciousness, [...] under-reported and scarcely documented.” (Palladino 219-20) 2013 is also the year of one of the most tragic shipwrecks in the recent history of the Mediterranean passage. In October, a boat carrying hundreds of Africans, mostly Eritrean and Somali people, sank off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa, causing the death of more than 360 migrants. The dramatic reality of these and many other “wasted lives” (Bauman 2004) cannot always be silenced or easily dismissed under the label of “phantom shipwrecks,” as (in)famously happened in the so-called Christmas massacre of 1996 off the coast of Portopalo, in Sicily.<sup>5</sup> When these “incidents” do find a way to reach and occupy the

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<sup>5</sup> On the early hours of December 26th, a fishing vessel carrying more than 300 South Asian migrants sank off the coast of Portopalo, in Sicily, and 283 of its passengers drowned. For many years, the Italian government denied the shipwreck, dismissing the survivors' testimony. Both harbor officials and fishermen from Portopalo also kept

media, their complexity gets, however, both reduced and spectacularized. The focus on the anonymous victims aims to gloss over the multiplicity, and the complexity, of their stories, while also intending to cover a multi-layered framework of responsibilities. As Albahari points out, in these cases the single term “migration” is sufficient to describe “a long journey across exploitative times, criminal spaces, sovereign containment, economic systems, cultural styles, and legal regulations.” (Albahari 10) In other words, even when “the death of migrants is not hidden, it is sometimes traceless, white noise to quiet subsistence,” (Albahari 114) as its noise neither disturbs nor problematizes the common and simplified perception of the phenomenon itself.

In the world news reports, and especially in those of the Mediterranean countries directly involved in the events, the phenomenon of migration often tends to be “more attacked or defended than described and explored.” (Bond, Bonsaver, and Faloppa 3-4) Mainstream media’s obsessive focus on images of boats of desperate people, which we have now become so accustomed to, leads to a perception of migrants themselves as only powerless, and anonymous, victims. This attitude fits into the framework of contemporary presentism, which Enzo Traverso describes as the way in which memory of the past today always tends towards commemoration, so that the focus on the victims erases the realm of collective agency. In the same way, any agency behind the current phenomenon of migration gets immediately deleted from its simplified picture.

At the same time, the normative discourse that frames any visual representation of migratory flows across the Mediterranean Sea tends to crystallize into a narrative of “emergency,” put into place by a sovereign power that perceives itself as under threat. In the

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their silence about the event. Only in 2001, a local fisherman, having found human rests in his fishing nest, started talking about the tragedy. The sinking of the ship was finally revealed as the worst maritime disaster in the Mediterranean Sea after the Second World War (until it was surpassed by the sinking of another migrants’ boat off the coast of Lampedusa in 2013).

scenario of contemporary migration, the “state of exception is permanent, rather than temporary,” (Agamben 2) as the constant arrival of migrants’ boats on the coasts of southern Europe translates into a presumably endless threat to the public order. In other words, even when they are not just paternalistically portrayed as victims, migrants are immediately perceived and categorized as potential criminals or, in Gramsci’s terms, as a “mortal danger” that needs to be “fended off” in order to resolve the presumed state of crisis. (Gramsci 211) Thus, migrants are ultimately constructed as victims and criminals at the same time, as they appear in any case as “bodies without agency and will.” (Mazzara 460)

The “destination” countries, and Italy among them, take advantage of the “apparent unpredictability, abnormality, and brevity” (Albahari 13) of these supposed conditions of emergency in order, on the one hand, to cover their own negligence and the inadequateness of their own policies, and, on the other hand, to attribute the responsibility of the events to “un-seaworthiness, ruthlessness of smugglers, or stormy weather, to use some of the common explanatory phrases.”<sup>6</sup> (Albahari 74) While, in other words, first-world European countries perpetrate what Maurizio Albahari defines, and analyzes at length, as “crimes of peace,” the only possible responsibility migrants are left with is the (ir)responsibility of their own death.<sup>7</sup>

Needless to say, this pervasive “dominant rhetoric [that] portrays migrants as endangering European health, security, identity, and welfare, as an inhuman presence gathering at the southern frontier of ‘Fortress Europe,’” (Palladino 223) very heavily affects public opinion and the common imaginary surrounding the phenomenon of migration. In this context, the emergence of what Federica Mazzara calls “the counter-narrative of the aesthetic discourse”

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<sup>6</sup> On the specific case of Italy, see in particular Parati 2005, and Bond, Bonsaver, and Faloppa 2015. On nation-state sovereignty and the proliferation of borders in the contemporary globalized world see Mezzadra and Neilson 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Albahari also analyzes some of the most common expressions used by media in reporting on migration, and describes one of them in particular, “*carretta del mare*,” as exemplary of “political grammar of shipwrecks’ representation and explanation,” where passengers tend to be held “responsible for their own death.” (Albahari 96)

(Mazzara 449) is all the more significant, as it can provide alternative perspectives to mass-mediated images and to political and legal discourses.

These counter-narratives often privilege the form of documentary, which seems to be able to have a stronger and more immediate impact on the audience than other kinds of cultural products. In reclaiming spaces of visibility for migrants in Lampedusa – the Italian Island whose complex, and heterotopic, space-time dimension makes it a privileged destination for both migrants coming from North Africa and international tourists –, Mazzara focuses on Dagmawi Yimer's *Soltanto il mare*.<sup>8</sup> In this documentary, the Ethiopian director's own migration to Lampedusa is the point of departure for a revisiting of the space of the island with its contradictory identity. Similarly, Palladino and Gjergji's analysis of *Mare chiuso*, Stefano Liberti and Andrea Segre's documentary that tells the story of a migrants' boat pushed back to Libya by the Italian authorities in 2009, interprets the work as an "instance of postcolonial resistance," (Palladino and Gjergji 2) in which the migrants' direct testimonies aim to unveil the hypocrisy of official narratives.

The intention to denounce and raise awareness of the multiple layers of exploitation and connivances that lie behind any flat representation of migration also informs Andrea Segre's African trilogy. In his three documentaries, the director depicts the migrants' departure from Africa, the arrival, and the settling in Italy as the three distinct stages of the same, "complex, burning process." (Di Maio 45) In this way, Segre aims to complicate a simplistic conception of migration, while also addressing it from the point of view of those who are mostly considered just the anonymous victims of it. A similar aim to give voice to the silent (or silenced) people directly involved in the complex process of migration animates Franco Rosi's largely acclaimed *Fuocoammare*, awarded the Golden Bear at the 2016 International Berlin Film Festival. This

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<sup>8</sup> On Lampedusa as "crisis heterotopia" see Pugliese 2009. See Mazzara, "Spaces of Visibility" 2016.



lyrical documentary, which focuses on the often forgotten people of Lampedusa, portrays their daily struggle to adequately respond to the continuous flows of migrants on the island. Rosi's work undoubtedly manages to go beyond a simple act of denunciation, as it adopts the unusual point of view of a 12-year-old boy and proposes what Sandra Ponzanesi defines as a "new aesthetic of the border." (Ponzanesi 152) However, the intentional focus on the people of Lampedusa throughout the entire film once again annihilates, or at least significantly reduces, the space reserved for the migrants' voices, affecting their visibility and the emergence of their individuality. In this sense, *Fuocoammare* does not really succeed in challenging a "representational system that aims at reducing migrant subjectivities to mere bodies without words and yet threatening in their presence as a mass, a multitude, an hemorrhagic stream of anonymous and unfamiliar others." (Mazzara 460)

Both in the case of the "pure" documentaries and in the case of *Fuocoammare*'s subtle intersection of fiction and reality, the dimension of criticism that is inherent in the genre, while creating an unofficial, hence relevant, narrative of the events, runs the risk of not leaving enough space for imagining alternatives.<sup>9</sup> The two literary narratives I focus on here, Lina Prosa's *Lampedusa Beach* and Razan Moghrabi's *Women of the Wind*, clearly and effectively problematize the current, and dominant, narrative of migration, whose shortcomings I have previously highlighted. Moreover, the play and the novel create the narrative space for a potential Mediterranean alternative to be envisioned.

In a recent collection of essays dedicated to the representation of migration in Italian media and narrative, Bond, Bonsaver and Faloppa note how "literature holds something of a

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<sup>9</sup> A partially different methodological and theoretical concern lies behind Mariangela Palladino's conception of trans-coastal narratives that "burn the divide across the Mediterranean, and tell of departure, arrival, and loss." (Palladino 219) The scholar engages with Italophone poetry, seen as establishing a "new discursive category in contemporary postcolonial literature," in order, however, to show how "Erri De Luca's and Mohammed Lamsuni's poetry denounces, accuses, documents and memorializes what happens between Africa and Europe." (Palladino 232) Once again, the dimension of denunciation, which is undoubtedly crucial in any example of counter-narrative of migration, here however prevails over the need to imagine alternatives.

privileged position in the voicing of migration experience,” as “it is precisely through narrative that most migrants to Italy have been able to publicly speak through a first person perspective.” (Bond, Bonsaver, and Faloppa 14) Following this assertion, the essays in the “literature” section of the book focus on first-person narratives of autobiographical experiences, mainly aimed to “chart and reflect the changing status and experience of migrants within Italian society.” (Bond, Bonsaver, and Faloppa 14) My deliberate choice not to include in this chapter on migration narrative(s) any of the works that, in the Italian literary market, would be likely labeled as “letteratura migrante,” stems from the intent not to focus on issues of personal identity and national belonging (so crucial, and especially urgent, in the Italian context).<sup>10</sup> Rather, my intention is to open the very narrative of migration to a broader Mediterranean framework. In the case of Prosa’s play, the protagonist’s personal experience of migration, while still individualized and narrated through a first-person monologue, rejects a “continental perspective,” as it revolves around the specific moment of the passage, and the potentiality that lies in it, before and regardless of its actualization. In Moghrabi’s novel, the chorus of female voices that sustains the narrative movement creates a diffracted story, in which departure, journey, arrival, and settling are inseparable from each other, constantly re-experienced through different points of view, while also always imagined and postponed to a narrative future to be achieved.

Even though neither the novel nor the play responds to an autobiographical drive, in both cases migration is far from being normatively presented as a phenomenon that revolves around masses of anonymous people.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, through very individualized female

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<sup>10</sup> Lidia Curti shows how many female migrant writers in Italy focus their stories on their difficult adjustment to the hosting country (see Curti 2006). It is interesting to note how a large number of migrant writers in Italy are women, the 30% of the entire corpus, as opposed to the 10% of female writers in Italian contemporary literature as a whole, as Daniele Comberiati pointed out (see Comberiati 2010).

<sup>11</sup> As Alessandra di Maio highlights, “the autobiographical element has been crucial to the development of the Italian literature of immigration.” (Di Maio 2001: 150)

characters, who narrate their own experiences in the first person, Prosa's and Moghrabi's narratives are capable of restoring a perspective on migration that is often silenced and marginalized. In both works, the gendered bodies and voices of the two protagonists reclaim a distinctive narrative agency that is able to put into question the dominant and pervasive rhetoric of migration.

Finally, the juxtaposition and interaction, in the space of this chapter, of these two particular narratives also aim to complicate the perspective on two specific countries within a broader Mediterranean context where power imbalance manifests itself on the different shores. Italy and Libya are undoubtedly at the very forefront of migration itself, while the complex interrelation between the two countries still carries the specter of colonial legacies. In the common imaginary and in the media that creates and sustains it the two countries are simplistically depicted as point of departure (Libya) and destination site (Italy) of continuous migratory flows. What however goes mostly unnoticed – but is highlighted in both Prosa's and Moghrabi's narratives – is that Libya is already a point of arrival for many migrants, while Italy, when it does not remain only a dreamed landing site, is in any case often just a first, and unavoidable, step within the plan of a longer journey. Thus, both countries often become, from the migrants' perspective, forced spaces of non-belonging, as they also share sophisticated strategies of control and detention.

## I. A Sea of Words in Lina Prosa's Narrative Shipwreck

*E subito riprende  
Il viaggio  
Come  
Dopo il naufragio  
Un superstite  
Lupo di mare.  
(And like a surviving  
sea-wolf  
after the shipwreck  
he immediately starts  
on the journey again.)*

Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Allegria di Naufragi* [*The Joy of Shipwrecks*]

### A Performative Narrative

Although Lina Prosa's *Lampedusa Beach* is not technically a "narrative" work, as it is conceived as a play and thus intended to be performed on stage, the narrative dimension of the play clearly prevails over its dramatic aspects. In classical narratology, drama has long been considered as the opposite of the novel, a purely mimetic genre in which, supposedly, the action is directly enacted and not narrated.<sup>12</sup> In the context of a radical reorientation of narrative theory at the end of the last century, Monika Fludernik significantly reassessed the boundaries of the realm of narrative to explicitly include dramatic works. In particular, the Austrian scholar stressed the importance of narrator figures on stage in many dramatic performances, as well as the narrativity of stage directions within play scripts.<sup>13</sup> In a more recent article, Fludernik considers monologue plays as specific examples of "plotless drama that nevertheless satisfy the definitional criteria of narrativity," (Fludernik 360) as they instantiate a dramatic narrator figure. As the scholar further explains, the "narrative discourse of drama," namely "the level of

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<sup>12</sup> Starting from Gerard Genette's influential study *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*, which dates back to 1980.

<sup>13</sup> See Fludernik 1996.

mediation” of the dramatic work itself, includes both the dramatic text, the script, and the ‘performance text,’ namely all the elements that belong to the performance level of the staging.” (Fludernik 362)

In this perspective, Prosa’s play proves a significant example of what we can call a “narrative drama,” as the performative nature of the narrative itself takes over the dramatic elements of the performance. In *Lampedusa Beach*, for the entire time of the performance the actress is alone on the stage, sitting on a chair, narrating/performing her own story. The stasis of the acting is therefore counter-balanced by the actress/narrator’s constant utterance of words, where the narrative movement itself compensates for the lack of movement on stage. It is not by chance that stage directions in Prosa’s play are minimal, almost absent, whereas the narrativity of the dramatic text is preserved, and predominant, throughout the play.

At the same time, the narrative that the play and the female protagonist/narrator within it create is highly performative not simply, and not primarily, by virtue of its dramatic nature, but mostly in relation to its own narrative aspects. When applied to narratology, the concept of performativity “denotes modes of presenting or evoking action,” when narratives work “as a form of (speech) action in a larger pragmatic and cultural context.” (Berns 95-6, 97) Thus, performativity relates to embodied presentations of the events, as in dramatic writing, only in a narrow sense, whereas it can be, in a much broader sense, applied to non-corporeal presentations, as in written narratives.

The case of Prosa’s play is significantly hybrid, since the dramatic nature of the work does not exclude the presence, and the performance, of a narrator that mediates the events, as they do not technically “happen” on the stage.<sup>14</sup> What instead does occupy the whole physical

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<sup>14</sup> In the article I already quoted on the narrativity of drama, Fludernik starts by pointing out that one thing that usually distinguishes fiction from drama is that in the latter the setting is a visual given, which does not require description. However, this is not exactly the case in Prosa’s *Lampedusa Beach* where, as I said, the stage only

and metaphorical space of the stage is the narrator's own agency, which consists precisely in the act of telling her own story at the time of its happening. Prosa's drama is undoubtedly a narrative drama.

In the performative act of self-narration, the protagonist/narrator of the play – and the author through her own character – creates her own Mediterranean as a generative space of critique of dominant narratives and constructions, and the very space in which alternatives can and must be envisioned. In the *Introduction* to the play, Prosa affirms the intention to distance herself from the common depiction of migration as an ordinary phenomenon: “La fine tragica di una creatura qualunque, anonima, come può essere un clandestino o una clandestina a bordo delle carrette del mare, così come li vediamo quotidianamente attraverso i mass media, nella scrittura non è un fatto ordinario.”<sup>15</sup> (Prosa 11) On the contrary, it is precisely the written narrative of the story itself that can and must make it relevant and “extraordinary.” In the politicized framework of contemporary media, the word “extraordinary” in the context of the so-called “migration crisis” tends to suggest the sense of an “exception,” that requires as such extraordinary practices of reaction. When this exception is, then, perceived as a threatening permanent state, an unending crisis, emergency measures do not need to be further questioned, and they become the norm, the only way to preserve the pre-existing order.<sup>16</sup> In Prosa's conception, on the contrary, it is through a renewed process of narration that migration can and

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features a woman sitting on a chair with her sunglasses and a bucket of water beside her. One of the few authorial interventions and stage directions, which occurs however outside of the space of the drama, is condensed in two short texts right before the actress' first line. In the first one, “*la storia*,” Prosa briefly explains the plot, while the second one, “*il teatro*,” describes the very basic elements of the stage. Does not only, then, the setting need to be described, despite its visual immediacy, but also the story is here summed up in a few lines, and both sections are not simply stage directions, as their “narrative” character, still in Fludernik's terms, makes them integral part of the whole drama. In other words, nothing in Prosa's play seems to be visually given or taken for granted without the support of the written narrative.

<sup>15</sup> “The tragic end of an ordinary, anonymous, creature, like a clandestine man or woman on the floating wrecks, as we see them every day in the mass media, in the act of writing is not an ordinary thing.”

<sup>16</sup> See Agamben 2005.

must become extraordinary, as the narrative itself enables the migrant's own condition to gain a new, and urgent, space of visibility.

The performative narrative that sustains Prosa's Mediterranean shipwreck ultimately restores the phenomenon of migration in its own spatial and temporal depth. The protagonist's monologue embodies an alternative narrative of migration that recovers its link to the past, affirms its urgency in the present, and creates its potentiality for the future, both within and beyond the space of a Mediterranean that witnesses it.

### A Suspended Simultaneity of Acts and Words

The play *Lampedusa Beach*, on which I focus my analysis, is the first part of Lina Prosa's *Trilogia del Naufragio* [*Trilogy of the Shipwreck*], which includes the later plays *Lampedusa Snow* and *Lampedusa Way*.<sup>17</sup> The only "real" shipwreck that gives its name to the trilogy happens in the dramatic and narrative space of the first monologue play. In *Lampedusa Beach*, the young African female protagonist, Shauba, tells the story of her own tragic death in the failed attempt to cross the Mediterranean and reach the Italian island of Lampedusa. Thus, the non-heroine Shauba lives and narrates her own story at the same time, as both the events and the narration of it take place in the time frame of a single dramatic act.

The author's own remarks on the play provide an interesting insight for my own interpretation of her work within the larger framework of the narrative Mediterranean I propose in the dissertation. Prosa asserts here the simultaneity of experience and narrative within the dramatic dimension of Shauba's own shipwreck: "Il tempo della discesa del corpo negli abissi coincide con il tempo della scrittura. La parola annegata di Shauba dà vita a un'odissea

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<sup>17</sup> The first one dates back to 2003, while Prosa wrote the second one in 2012, and the last one in 2013. The whole trilogy was first staged in Paris in 2014, and arrived in Italy only in 2015.

sott'acqua in cui la fine, l'arrivo al fondo, è un respiro lungo elevato a racconto.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the time of Shauba's physical shipwreck is simultaneous with the time of her narrative shipwreck. From a broader point of view, the play then suggests how the time of living the Mediterranean coincides with the time of narrating it, as the two dimensions cannot be ultimately separated. In this perspective, the events and their narrative are also co-dependent and mutually determined, as the events take shape in the very process of being narrated.

In proper narrative terms, simultaneity indicates the concurrence of narration and the narrated, a narrative condition in which there is no discrepancy between the time of the story and the time of the discourse. In this particular narrative condition, as Uri Margolin explains, “the events are still ongoing (inchoative or incomplete) at the time they are being represented, and the ensuing epistemic impossibility of fully representing [...] that which is not yet concluded at the time of reporting.” (Margolin 779) In the specific case of *Lampedusa Beach*, as the playwright suggests, the time of Shauba's drowning is coincident with the time of her own narrative, and it is precisely this impossible condition of coincidence that ultimately leads to the suspension of the narrative itself. Shauba's monologue creates and sustains her own journey within and beyond the written space of the text and the physical space of the stage, to the point that the two of them – the narrative monologue and the journey itself – cannot be separated anymore. At the same time, they are both unconcluded and, as such, “elevated” towards an arrival that is impossible to represent, but which can only be imagined. In a kind of counter-*Odyssey*, Shauba's impossible *nostos*, as well as her negated landing, is the necessary precondition for resistance in the present and for the potentiality of the future.

This particular condition of narrative simultaneity that Prosa's play relies upon significantly contributes to the dramatic dimension of the play itself. More precisely, it is the

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<sup>18</sup> “The time of the body going down into the abyss coincides with the time of writing. Shauba's drowned word creates an underwater odyssey in which the end, getting to the bottom, is a long breath elevated to a tale.”



performative immediacy of the narrative that intentionally compensates for the limited visual, and mimetic, character of the staging. In any example of simultaneous narrative, “the reporting is endowed with scenic immediacy, which in turn lends it superior immersive power with respect to the reader, who can imagine himself as being on the scene then and there, viewing the events as they unfold, experiencing them.” (Margolin 781) In Prosa’s play, the Mediterranean setting is not visually presented to the audience. However, the narrative quality of the play-script evokes it, makes it visual and ultimately turns it into a crucial space for the unfolding of the drama itself. Moreover, the fact that this very act of narrative reporting is not left to an external narrator, but it rather occurs in the first-person voice of the narrator/protagonist, makes the narrative itself even more immediate and urgent. Shauba’s own dramatic narrative is not simply the report of something looked at from outside, but is rather the telling of what is directly experienced at the time in which it happens.

Furthermore, there is another layer of simultaneity that Prosa’s own remarks, quoted above, introduce within the narrative dimension of the play. According to the playwright, the simultaneity between the events and their narration extends beyond the level of the narrator to the level of the author. In Prosa’s words, Shauba’s drowning does not only coincide with the protagonist’s oral narration of it, but it also happens at the very moment of Prosa’s own writing of the play itself. This does not mean that the author intends to overlap here with the narrator. Rather, in the same way as Shauba’s dramatic monologue gives voice to her agency within the space of the drama, Prosa aims to claim her own agency in the larger space of the Mediterranean narrative world in which, and about which, she writes. The artificial theater stage space and the real stage of the Mediterranean outside of it are not separated from each other, but mutually interconnected as one constantly refers to, and aims to affect, the other and vice versa. As the playwright puts it, “Io credo in quella prassi del teatro contemporaneo che non sia

estranea a ciò che sta fuori e intorno al palcoscenico.”<sup>19</sup> (Prosa 9) The written narrative itself, then, both shapes and is shaped by the events narrated in it, as, in Prosa’s own words, “si fa progetto da sé, sfugge alla postazione, perché è viva, in movimento e si mescola al vissuto e a volte lo forma anche.”<sup>20</sup> (Prosa 9) It is the written dimension of her own story that sustains Shauba’s movement within the space of both a narrative and a real Mediterranean world.

Not by chance, the movement of the uttered and written word within the simultaneous happening of the narrated events extends beyond *Lampedusa Beach*, as the same condition informs the two subsequent parts of the trilogy. In *Lampedusa Snow*, Shauba’s brother, Mohamed, performs a monologue in which he narrates his “vertical” shipwreck on the Italian Alps. After landing on the “promised (is)land” of Lampedusa, Mohamed is brought to the mountains, where he waits, struggles, and ultimately fails to adjust and obtain his resident permit. In the last play, *Lampedusa Way*, Shauba’s aunt, Mahama, and Mohamed’s uncle, Saif, reach Lampedusa beach. Here, they too wait in vain to have news of their beloved ones, while narrating, in the form of a dramatic dialogue, their own horizontal shipwreck in the island’s space.

In the *Introduction* to the trilogy, Prosa explains how she conceived the three plays in three distinct moments, as her own journey was finally moving “oltre il primo approdo, oltre i confini.”<sup>21</sup> (Prosa 9) The whole trilogy, then, is articulated on two different, and yet again simultaneous, levels, namely the two complementary dimensions of the journey itself. Shauba’s physical and narrative journey towards Lampedusa, which cannot end off the coast of the Island, gets reactivated in Mohamed’s physical and narrative journey from Lampedusa

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<sup>19</sup> “I believe in that practice of contemporary theater that is not detached from what is outside and around the stage.”

<sup>20</sup> “becomes a project in itself, refuses a designated position since it is a living and moving thing that mixes with life and even creates it, at times.”

<sup>21</sup> “beyond the first landing site, beyond the borders.”

onwards, and they both flow into Mahama and Saif's inconclusive journey on Lampedusa itself. On a further level, they are all the same journey, which is the author's journey through the process of her own writing; a journey that itself tends towards that same Mediterranean space that initiates it and makes it possible.

### A Diachronic Simultaneity

The condition of simultaneity that characterizes the play in the form of a coincidence between the time of the narrated event and the narrative time also extends to the temporality within the story-time itself, as events occurred at different times are narrated as if happening at the same time. In the single time frame of the dramatic monologue, and in the single space of the Mediterranean Sea on which the events are supposed to happen, different temporalities are brought together and interact significantly with each other. Shauba's current Mediterranean shipwreck, in other words, is capable of re-connecting past, present, and future of her own story, and of the Mediterranean setting that witnesses it. In doing so, the play deploys, in a particular way, a further condition of narrative simultaneity, which in narratological terms is defined as "apparent concurrent narration." In this case, as Margolin suggests, "the events being ostensibly reported in real time as they unfold are in fact past or future with respect to the speaker's temporal position," (Margolin 786) as the speaker either re-lives them or anticipates them in a prophetic immediacy. Even when, in other words, Shauba recalls episodes of her past, or rather expresses her own aspirations for the future, the temporal juxtaposition of past and future within the present time of narration makes the interaction of these temporalities particularly relevant and urgent.

In the only apparently static space of the Mediterranean Sea, where the whole play takes place, Shauba's own narrative develops through a constant movement across these different

temporalities. In this way, the whole Mediterranean, and her peculiar condition within it, gains depth and restores its own complexity by virtue of being narrated. On the edge of death, where “tutto rallenta,”<sup>22</sup> (Prosa 17) Shauba grasps the last opportunity to reconnect the multiple dimensions of her life – the past, the present, and a glimpse of a negated, but still imagined, future – within the larger Mediterranean context. It is as if the very fluid movement of the Mediterranean Sea that sustains Shauba’s story slows down in order for the narrative itself to emerge, challenging Zygmunt Bauman’s liquid and fast modernity in the very space in which its most profound contradictions raise to the surface.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Prosa’s Mediterranean becomes here a resourceful space for a renewed understanding of the past, a critical awareness of the present, and an urgent call to the future.

Shauba’s past, as she herself reactivates it in various moments of her monologue, is both personal and collective, recent and more distant. The most vivid moments of this past are condensed in the recent stages of the arrangement of her Mediterranean passage, which her aunt Mahama is mostly responsible for. These stages, which are often overlooked in the dominant narrative of migration, are nevertheless part of the same “burning process” to which Segre’s documentaries powerfully call attention.<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that, in her own monologue, Shauba refers to the various phases of this preliminary arrangement not in the simple past, but rather in the remote past tense, (“preparò,” “segui,” “fece,” “venne”, Prosa 22)<sup>25</sup> a literary tense, and not commonly used in spoken dialogues. Thus, far from appearing simultaneous to the current situation, these past moments seem at first very distant and, as such, detached from her present condition. However, after this very short section in the past tense, Shauba’s monologue leaves space to Mahama’s first-person voice. In a long passage of direct speech that interrupts,

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<sup>22</sup> “everything slows down”

<sup>23</sup> See Bauman 2000.

<sup>24</sup> See Andrea Segre’s *South of Lampedusa* (2006), *Like A Man on Earth* (2008), and *Green Blood* (2011).

<sup>25</sup> “prepared,” “followed,” “did,” “came”

or rather adds a further dimension to Shauba's monologue, Mahama tells her niece about the arrangements, and then gives her advice and exhortations for the trip: "Non ti preoccupare [...] Devi salire tra i primi [...] devi correre [...] devi andare [...] Ti serviranno gli occhiali. / Devi tenerli fissi all'orizzonte. / Devi avere sempre la padronanza della direzione [...] Puoi controllare tu stessa l'arrivo."<sup>26</sup> (Prosa 23) Here, the memory of the past events gets translated into the present tense and in the imperative mood, or even, in one instance, projected into the future time of the journey itself, so as to gain new urgency by virtue of its own narrative re-actualization.

Furthermore, while bringing back the past within the dramatic urgency of the present, Mahama's speech gives also voice to her imagined dimension of a future that would start at the very end of the journey itself. The last word of Mahama's direct speech is "cartolina,"<sup>27</sup> (Prosa 24) as she firmly states her belief that, no matter what happens in the time-space of the journey, Shauba will be able to reach Lampedusa, and to see the island as it appears on a postcard owned by Mahama. As Christine Ross points out in her study of the dimension of simultaneity in contemporary art, the many contemporary examples of coming together of the past and the envisioned future in the space of the present do not necessarily need to translate into an articulation of contemporary presentism.<sup>28</sup> Rather, the overlapping of different times can be seen as a specific example of what Agamben describes as contemporaneity, namely "a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it [...] that relationship with time that adheres to it, through a disjunction and an anachronism." (Agamben 2009: 41) The "present-ness" of Mahama's speech does not erase the

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<sup>26</sup> "Don't worry [...] You have to be among the first to get on [...] you have to run [...] you have to go [...] You will need the glasses. You have to keep them focused on the horizon. You need to always have command of the direction [...] You can check the arrival yourself."

<sup>27</sup> "postcard"

<sup>28</sup> See Ross 2012. On the risks of presentism as a disconnection from both the past and the future see Hartog 2015.

past conditions, and the efforts, that have determined it, while at the same time literally “picturing” the hope for a future to come. The present tense of Mahama’s direct speech – as the present-ness of Shauba’s monologue that contains it and constitutes the whole play – does not reject historicity, but rather “gains in texture, thickness, influence, and complexity when it is set into proximity with the past and the future.” (Ross 14) In this case, the theatrical dimension of the text also comes into play, as the coexistence of the voices and of the different temporalities within the actress’ single performance on stage bears witness to the thickness of the present event – more than the written text alone would do.

The dimension of the past that inevitably flows into and complicates the perception of the present is not confined, in Prosa’s play, to the personal story of the narrator/protagonist. Although Shauba never refers to her native African country with a specific name, her voice reveals nevertheless the specters of a collective past which is more remote and yet still very present, while equally too often and too easily dismissed. It is the past of Italian colonialism in Africa, which becomes tangible in Shauba’s own memories of the time spent in a religious mission, where her aunt sent her in order to listen to “tutto quello che si diceva su Roma.”<sup>29</sup> (Prosa 20) Rome is, for Mahama’s generation that has lived under the colonial rule, a distant, and yet still appealing, mirage, “una cartolina rubata a una bambina adottata per corrispondenza da una coppia di romani.”<sup>30</sup> (Prosa 20) Thus, Rome also becomes the final destination that Mahama dreams of for her niece, after the preliminary landing on the space of Lampedusa. It is not by chance that the two locations can be grasped, within the space of the play, only through touristic images; images that are made on purpose to foster illusory expectations, hence intended to erase the more complex and often contradictory nature of the places. In a significant reversal of perspective, the Italian postcards depicting the African colonies and their people,

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<sup>29</sup> “everything that was being said about Rome.”

<sup>30</sup> “a postcard, stolen from a little girl who has been adopted through mail order by a Roman couple.”

widely circulated at the time of Italy's belated participation in the "scramble for Africa," translate here into a visual imaginary of the metropole itself, which still attracts with its myth of progress and the false allure of its modernity. Moreover, Rome and Lampedusa are undoubtedly two emblematic spaces of Italian colonial and post-colonial identities and, even more significantly, sites where these very identities get continuously contested and renegotiated. Lampedusa, point of arrival of the migrants' flows and location of a large detention center, inevitably becomes a "site of tension that has also produced critical spaces of cultural expressions." (Mazzara 129) Rome, on the other hand, so heavily marked by material traces of the Italian colonial past, witnesses a constant process of remapping of its own urban space, thus participating in the contemporary deconstruction and reconstruction of Italian national identity within, and beyond, the space of the peninsula.<sup>31</sup>

This dimension of the colonial past, which informs Shauba's present condition, is also crucial for the present – and likely future – of the Mediterranean as a whole. As Chambers and Curti suggest, it is necessary to "re-think the Mediterranean, and with it Europe and its modernity, in the disquieting light of its doubling and displacement by a past that never fades away; a past that persists to interrogate the present and its potential futures." (Chambers and Curti 389) This contemporary Mediterranean, so profoundly affected by the heavy presence of its apparently irredeemable colonial past, becomes, in the words of the narrator/protagonist of the play, "immensità opaca,"<sup>32</sup> (Prosa 18) an infinity that can only confound the vision. In Shauba's situation, the Mediterranean Sea is the stage of a contemporary shipwreck that seems

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<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Igiaba Scego's autobiographical novel *La mia casa è dove sono* [*My Home is Where I Am*]. Scego "draws" a narrative map of Rome that envelops Mogadishu, thus showing the deep historical entanglement of Italy with Africa, as well as the significant impact of African diaspora on the configuration of contemporary Rome. By remapping the urban space of the city, Scego also remaps her Afro-Italian identity, while at the same time putting into question contemporary Italian identity as a whole. On the question of contemporary re-mapping of cityscapes in Italy see Romeo 2015.

<sup>32</sup> "opaque immensity"

not to retain any trace of Leopardi's sweetness. "Naufragare m'è duro in questo mare,"<sup>33</sup> (Prosa 18) the young woman states as she quite explicitly alludes to, and rephrases, Leopardi's well-known line.

The toughness of Shauba's current shipwreck reaches far beyond the contingency of her own voyage by sea, and the tangible risks related to it for her own life. By means of equally fervent appeals to both the Italian and the African President, Shauba's monologue denounces and brings to the surface a much broader dimension of the phenomenon of migration, which is mostly silenced in mainstream media. The protagonist of Prosa's play manages to call into question, and ultimately reject, an oversimplified conception of migrants as just victims of an unfortunate journey across the sea. At the same time, Shauba's narrative shipwreck reveals how motivations and roots of the often tragic outcome of migratory journeys go well "beyond spatial and temporal array of events such as shipwrecks," as "entrenched asymmetries of power, wealth, and authority are integral to border dynamics." (Albahari 22)

At the very moment in which the boat carrying her towards her dreamed destination is sinking, Shauba firmly enunciates her awareness of a present form of colonialism. This neo-colonialism manifests itself in the long-standing power imbalance between the opposing Italian and African shores of the Mediterranean, which in turn allows for the continuing exploitation of the latter. Hence, the African woman denounces a capitalism that "in Affrica, da quando è arrivato [...] un giorno si mangia e uno no."<sup>34</sup> (Prosa 21) This imported form of Western capitalism has only apparently improved the conditions of the African people, as they have moved, in Shauba's own words, from being children with no hopes to feeling treated as dogs.

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<sup>33</sup> "being shipwrecked is hard for me in this sea"

<sup>34</sup> "since it arrived, people in Affrica can eat every other day." I will come back later to explain and discuss the meaning –and the significance– of the spelling with the double "f."



“Ci lasci crescere bambini senza speranza. / È meglio,”<sup>35</sup> (Prosa 35) Shauba asks the President of an unspecified African country that inevitably resuscitates the specters of Libya and its colonel Gaddafi, with whom Italian political leaders had long collaborated in the attempt to control and discipline migration itself. As Shauba clearly affirms, the nurturing of illusory hopes, in Libya as in other African countries, has only, in the end, worsened the already tough reality of everyday life. Then, if Shauba has chosen voluntarily to leave her own African country, where a foreign capitalist system has destroyed any possibility of life and growth, this does not make her either a victim or a criminal.

At the same time, in her imagined speech to the Italian President, Shauba calls, daringly and proudly, for a suppression of the existent geopolitical borders, while also denouncing the contradictory and concomitant presence, on the same Mediterranean Sea, of migrants’ “carrette del mare” and tourists’ cruise ships. “Ci regali la crociera... ci faccia viaggiare una settimana su una nave importante... / non si preoccupi se siamo cadaveri senza più forma [...] Lei non ci guardi... si giri dall’altro lato. / Ma ci mandi in crociera... ci porti in vacanza nel Mediterraneo.”<sup>36</sup> (Prosa 36) While the Mediterranean has become a huge, collective grave, it has also never ceased to be regarded as the beautiful cradle of ancient civilizations. As such, the Mediterranean is still a favorite and fascinating destination of a global tourism that ignores, or turns its back, to the tragedy unfolding before it. In this context, the very uncontrolled flows of migrants on the major coastal sites is an actual concern of the tourism industry, as the “formless corpses” keep threatening the presumed absolute and intangible “form” of a supposed pre-existing order. However, this double dimension of the contemporary Mediterranean, whose identity lies at the problematic interaction of migration and mass tourism, also makes it a crucial

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<sup>35</sup> “let us grow up as children with no hope, it is better”

<sup>36</sup> “Take us on a cruise as a present... let us travel for a week on an important ship... / don’t worry if we are formless corpses [...] Don’t look at us... turn on the other side. / But send us on a cruise... take us on a holiday on the Mediterranean.”

site for the emergence of a counter-narrative of its own space.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the present time of Shauba's physical shipwreck can and must also be the present time of her alternative Mediterranean narrative, which aims to complicate the dominant, and unproblematic, narrative of migration.

While Shauba's narrative shipwreck allows the emergence of a different awareness of migration as a whole phenomenon, it cannot apparently erase the dramatic reality of the physical shipwreck itself. In the poetic language of the play, Shauba's suffering is emphasized by the rhetorical urgency of the anaphora in two distinct passages of her own monologue. In both cases, Shauba directs her fervent lament to Mahama (to whose significance as an insistently evoked presence throughout the monologue and a proper character within the whole trilogy I will come back later). If in the first instance Shauba only gives voice to her tears – "Piango Mahama. /Piango per te"<sup>38</sup> (Prosa 27) –, later in the monologue the anaphora becomes more insistent, as Shauba feels the urge to reveal the roots of her own pain: "Sto male, Mahama, sto male [...] Sto male perché sono troppo sola dinanzi a un problema così grande. / Sto male perché io e te siamo più ignoranti di quanto credevamo. / Sto male perché non so cos'è questo mare..."<sup>39</sup> (Prosa 30) As Shauba here explains to Mahama, her present suffering and her unawareness, or rather the awareness of her ignorance regarding the circumstances and the preconditions of her own tragedy are intimately related.

However, it is precisely in the current time of this very suffering that Shauba has finally reached a new awareness, so that her whole monologue becomes a testimony of this acquired

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<sup>37</sup> As I will come back to later, Lampedusa emblemizes this contradictory dimension of the whole Mediterranean, being itself a privileged landing site of migratory flows, while also an attractive tourist destination.

<sup>38</sup> "I cry Mahama. / I cry for you."

<sup>39</sup> "I am in pain, Mahama, I am in pain [...] I am in pain because I am too lonely in front of such a big problem. I am in pain because you and I are more ignorant than we thought. I am in pain because I don't know what this sea is."

knowledge that, on the verge of her own death, (“Sto male perché muoio,”<sup>40</sup> Prosa 30) needs to be narrated. Thus, the space of the migrants’ boat, on which the entire play takes place, is the space that determines and witnesses Shauba’s suffering, while, at the same time, sustaining the emergence of her own narrative resistance. In his interpretation of contemporary Lampedusa as a heterotopic space of crisis, characterized by complex and contradictory dimensions of space-time, Joseph Pugliese argues that “Foucault’s celebratory boat heterotopias” become, in the case of the migrants’ boats, “crisis heterotopias of loss, death and mourning.” (Pugliese 124) Shauba’s boat is undoubtedly a space of loss and death, but it is also, similarly to the slave ships of Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, a “cultural and political unit.” (Gilroy 16) Even more, as Cristina Lombardi-Diop argues in her study of the links between African contemporary literary texts about migration and memories of the Atlantic middle passage, the spectral presence and the re-actualization of the Atlantic passage in the contemporary form of human trafficking across the Mediterranean “are the embodiment of future voices in literary form and a possibility of political awareness and agency in the present.” (Lombardi-Diop 163) Shauba’s own narrative awareness and the agency of her Mediterranean passage belong to the same effort.

### Narrative Resistance in the Present and for the Future

Shauba’s narrative voice emerges from the same sea under which her body slowly gets submerged. It is a condition of “emergency” in its etymological sense, before the negative meaning prevailed over the neutral connotation of the original Latin “*emergo*.” The actual meaning of “temporary event” the term “emergency” carries translates into a continuous condition in the contemporary political discourse that is supposed to deal with it, since, in Agamben’s words, “the intentional creation of a permanent state of emergency has become one

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<sup>40</sup> “I am in pain because I die”

of the most important measures of contemporary States, democracies included.” (Agamben 2002) In the face of a state of emergency that, having lost its “provisional and exceptional” character, has instead “become the rule,” (Agamben 2002) – so that “states can remain lawful while transgressing individual rights” (Humphreys 678) – the emergence/emergency of Shauba’s narrative also needs to be continuous and to extend beyond the space of her physical death. “La parola annegata di Shauba”<sup>41</sup> never really drowns together with her body, while it keeps re-emerging from the water and resists the threat of being silenced.

The ultimate affirmation of a narrative urgency that overcomes the very condition of physical death can also explain why, since the very beginning of the play, the physical shipwreck is narrated as if already in the past, whereas the present time of the narrative shipwreck projects itself into a possible future. If “il naufragio è stato totale,”<sup>42</sup> (Prosa 18) Shauba’s narrative of it is not going to end, suspended in a liminal space that does not allow “né vivere né morire.”<sup>43</sup> (Prosa 29) If Shauba’s body lacks eternity, the water cannot kill her completely, (Prosa 29) as her monologue is destined to sustain the weight of her floating corpse. The play conveys the narrative of a female agency that has refused to stay “attaccata allo scoglio,”<sup>44</sup> (Prosa 26) rejecting what Giovanni Verga in *I Malavoglia* had suggested as the ultimate lifeline against the destructive power of modernity. On the contrary, the non-heroine Shauba has chosen, and embraced, migration as a voluntary journey, and can now only recognize and accept the impossibility of a return, which is the final and reassuring accomplishment of Homer’s Ulysses.

If Shauba’s *nostos* is clearly impossible in the current condition of the woman’s physical shipwreck, it would have not been desired either, as the dialectic of departure and arrival,

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<sup>41</sup> “Shauba’s drowned word”

<sup>42</sup> “the shipwreck was complete”

<sup>43</sup> “neither to live nor to die”

<sup>44</sup> “tethered to the rock”

leaving and landing, origin and destination is significantly complex throughout the play. In Shauba's own words, going back to her African country would have been "a defeat," as she would have renounced her aunt's and her own expectations for a better future. At the same time, getting to Lampedusa would have also implied a deep sense of guilt, derived from the acquired awareness – which now aggravates her pain – of the illusory character of her previous expectations related to the journey itself. The actual, physical journey, in which Shauba is only exposed to more and more exploitation, has destroyed her own "fede nel viaggio."<sup>45</sup> (Prosa 28) Even more importantly, the journey itself has revealed how the idea that has sustained it, namely the belief in a significant improvement of her own conditions moving from the African shore to the Italian one, was only illusory. What remains on both shores, once the journey has started, are only people waiting for corpses, either coastguards in Lampedusa, or Mahama herself on the African coastline. ("A Lampedusa i finanzieri guardano fisso le onde in attesa dei cadaveri dell'ultimo naufragio / E dall'altra parte? / Mahama tu che fai? / In che modo attendi il mio cadavere?" Prosa 31)<sup>46</sup>

Thus, once the African past and the only dreamed future on the Italian land have been deemed either impossible to re-actualize or unattainable, the only dimension that remains is the present on the sea, where the boat is the mobile element that stands "for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places" it connects. (Gilroy 16) It is, as we have seen, a present of physical suffering and death. However, it is also the present of the narrative resistance of Shauba's voice against the force that pushes her body down to the abyss. It is the time to worry and to make sure "che non tutto sia legato al caso,"<sup>47</sup> (Prosa 31) that this umpteenth shipwreck will not be classified once again as a sad and misfortunate event. The narrative shipwreck is destined to last

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<sup>45</sup> "faith in the journey"

<sup>46</sup> "In Lampedusa, the customs officers stare at the waves waiting for the corpses of the last shipwreck / And on the other side? / Mahama, what are you doing? / How are you waiting for my corpse?"

<sup>47</sup> "that would not everything be a result of chance"

as long as there is space for fight and resistance, so that the very resistance both creates and is created by the condition of the shipwreck itself. If “non c’è stata lotta, resistenza”<sup>48</sup> (Prosa 18) to the physical drowning, resistance nevertheless reclaims its own narrative space.

In the visual dimension of the play, the sunglasses Mahama gave Shauba before she left – and that the actress on stage holds in her hands – are the last material expression of this resistance, as they literally “fanno resistenza al peso del corpo.”<sup>49</sup> (Prosa 29) Thus, the insistent presence of the sunglasses on stage until the very end of the play – when, as the stage directions inform us, “l’attrice bagna abbondantemente gli occhiali. Li mette. Va via”<sup>50</sup> (Prosa 41) – symbolizes the equal persistence of an act of resistance that transcends both the physical and the narrative space of the play. Moreover, the sunglasses, as well as the coconut bowl Shauba carries with her despite the prohibition of taking any personal item on the boat, testify to a further, and often also dismissed, dimension of the migratory journey. As Chambers and Ianniciello suggest reflecting upon the experiment of the *Porto M* museum in Lampedusa, in which salvaged migrants’ objects are collected and exposed, these objects “left or lost by the migrants, with the attempt to provide an account of their passage and simultaneously interrogate our position,” help us reconsider Mediterranean migration as “part of a wider, transnational history that is not separated out and rendered distant from our everyday life.” (Chambers and Ianniciello 49, 48) In the space of the exhibition the scholars are referring to, “each object was the trace of a shipwreck, each object was a material and, at the same time, a narrative reminder of transit, migration, and survival. Each object was a ruin and, at the same time, a possibility.” (Chambers and Ianniciello 48-9)

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<sup>48</sup> “there was no fight, no resistance”

<sup>49</sup> “put up resistance against the weight of the body.”

<sup>50</sup> “the actress pours abundant water on the glasses. She puts them on. She leaves.”

In Prosa's play, the two objects Shauba carries with her on the boat are the physical, material mark of her suspension in a liminal state that cannot be resolved. They create the possibility for her particular narrative of migration to extend beyond the drama of the physical shipwreck itself, as they are responsible for carrying on this very narrative. They are certainly ruins, as they testify to a lack, and to Shauba's own death. But they are also the materialization of the potentiality that lack contains, as they create a narrative bridge from the memory of the past towards a still realizable future. In her speech to the African President, Shauba demands that her coconut bowl, itself "clandestine" on board, will be recalled, in case the Italian Navy finds it, and either given to Mahama or brought to a museum. As the last stage direction that "concludes" Shauba's suspended story informs the audience, a fisherman from Lampedusa catches a swordfish with Shauba's sunglasses on. Thus, the two objects together cover the narrative path of Shauba's own trajectory, establishing a connection between her boarding site and her dreamed destination. They are tangible traces of her past, while also opening up possibilities for a potential future, as their "interrogative presence" (Chambers and Ianniciello 49) takes over Shauba's own time and space of narration.

This potential future, which, within the enclosed space of the play, can only be imagined, takes progressively a more affirmative dimension within the narrative itself. At the beginning of her monologue, Shauba narrates the shipwreck as already in the past, while her upcoming death only terrifies her, as it catches her unprepared, literally uncovered: "Sono troppo scoperta. / Non voglio morire così, di vergogna."<sup>51</sup> (Prosa 18) At the moment in which she becomes aware of her physical vulnerability in the "heavy immensity" of the sea that surrounds her, Shauba can only imagine her future in the negative form, as a list of actions that

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<sup>51</sup> "I am too uncovered. / I don't want to die like this, of shame."

she won't be able to experience: "Non uscirò mai fuori. / Non verrò presa in braccio..."<sup>52</sup>

(Prosa 19) The only thing that can reassure her is the possibility to speak up and the thought that her own voice will be heard, which, in this specific moment, translates into the possibility of an imagined dialogue with her aunt Mahama: "È come se io ti ascoltassi e tu mi rispondessi."<sup>53</sup>

(Prosa 19)

A further significant occurrence of the future tense, this time in the positive form, takes place in another dramatic moment of Shauba's narrative shipwreck. It is the circumstance that eventually leads to the capsizing, as the old trafficker climbs over the bodies of the migrants stacked up on the boat in order to perpetrate a sexual violence. As terror and a dreadful feeling of claustrophobia almost overcome Shauba, she clings obstinately to a "suffocating voice" that she seems to hear from behind herself. Even if she cannot properly hear it, she can grasp the overall sense of the speech, and it creates the image, narrated in the future tense, of her own purification once landed in Lampedusa: "[...] sbarcheremo e tornerai pura. [...] A Lampedusa ti laveremo col latte di cocco e sarai la nostra regina."<sup>54</sup> (Prosa 26)

In both cases, the only escape from the tragic present condition and the possibility of envisioning a future arise from the emergence of a narrative voice that, although obstructed, suffocated, and submerging, ultimately manages to make itself heard. In other words, the very possibility of imagining a Mediterranean future – a future in and of the Mediterranean – necessarily passes through and emerges from narrative forms. The first case I have referred to is particularly significant, as the voice Shauba strives to hear is Mahama's voice, which has a peculiar connotation. Mahama's own speech is affected by an impediment, which consists in a reinforcement of the articulation of the consonant sound "f." The fact that this impediment

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<sup>52</sup> "I will never get out. / I will never be held in someone's arms..."

<sup>53</sup> "It is as if I listened to you, and you answered to me."

<sup>54</sup> "We will go ashore and you will be pure again. [...] In Lampedusa, we will wash you with coconut milk, and you will be our queen."



manifests itself in the very first line of the play (“Sono Mahama l’affricana”,<sup>55</sup> Prosa 17) and is then highlighted, and reclaimed in Shauba’s own final speech to the African President (“chiedo asilo politico al Signor Capo dello Stato d’Affffrica / con quattro effe, mi raccomando”,<sup>56</sup> Prosa 41) testifies to the particular meaning it acquires within the play. Shauba gets particularly attached to Mahama’s f’s on the verge of her sinking, at the very moment in which her own speech is more troubled, and yet more needed than ever. “Mi affeziono allo sfiatamento del dente della vecchia come se dinanzi alla morte non esistesse altro,”<sup>57</sup> (Prosa 20) Shauba affirms, as if this disrupted speech, this “sorta di balbuzie africana,”<sup>58</sup> (Prosa 17) is the only, and the last available form of reaching out, thus even more valuable.

It is also significant that this impediment seems to have a particular link with the space of the sea, as its name already implies. In the colloquial language, Shauba states, it takes the name of “balenite,” as it gives the impression that one has a whale (“balena” in Italian) on her mouth when speaking.<sup>59</sup> It is a condition that, according to Shauba, all fishes must have, as they live submerged under water. Here Shauba seems to suggest that the water itself creates impediments to one’s own speech, as, in the present circumstance of her own physical shipwreck, it also threatens Shauba’s narrative voice. Thus, in a sort of enigmatic passage, Shauba further addresses Mahama as follows: “La punta della tua lingua arrossata per la continua produzione di effe / non ha meno effetti della vita di un pesce, Mahama!”<sup>60</sup> (Prosa 21) The life of a fish is Shauba’s own life as well, as, in the whole play, she tends to identify herself

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<sup>55</sup> “I am Mahama, the Affffrican”

<sup>56</sup> “I ask the Affffrican President – with four f’s please – for asylum”

<sup>57</sup> “I become attached to the leak of the old lady’s tooth as if, in the face of death, nothing else existed.”

<sup>58</sup> “sort of African stutter”

<sup>59</sup> This passage of the play cannot avoid raising the question of language and translation, as it is not very clear how the relation between the name of the speech impediment and the word for “whale” could also work in Shauba’s own African language. As the play is in Italian, Shauba speaks throughout it in Italian, but, at this specific moment, the reader gets more aware of the little linguistic “malfunctioning,” or at least of the problematic nature of language choice in the whole text.

<sup>60</sup> “the tip of your tongue, red for the continuous production of f’s, does not have fewer effects than the life of a fish, Mahama!”

with the fish. Even better, in the process of her own getting submerged, she progressively “becomes” a fish, as the strands of her hair “svolazzano nell’acqua scura come alghe filamentose,”<sup>61</sup> (Prosa 38) while she is also the swordfish that the fisherman catches in the stage direction that closes the play. What Shauba seems to suggest in the previous passage, then, is that Mahama’s own strenuous effort to raise her own voice, despite her speech impediment, can and must have at least as much effect as Shauba’s own life (and death.) Since Mahama’s speech, within the narrative space of the play, can only find its own space in, and be mediated by, Shauba’s own monologue, here Shauba is ultimately reclaiming her space as both the protagonist and the narrator of her own story, where the dramatic condition of her first role does not obliterate the necessity of the second, and they are both enhanced by the movement of a Mediterranean Sea that frame them.

Once again, the dimensions of living and narrating the Mediterranean are inextricably tied. Shauba’s own life trajectory, and ultimately her death, bears witness to the complexities of the phenomenon of migration. The corpse itself can act as a fundamental testimony to the tragedy of migrants, as in the infamous case of Portopalo massacre, in 1996, where investigation started only four years after the events and only because fishermen kept catching human remains in their nets, tangible “evidence” of a long denied shipwreck. However, Shauba’s physical drowning has as many effects as Mahama’s challenged speech act, which cannot ultimately be silenced. More broadly then, the narrative of migration has effects on migration as a phenomenon itself. Shauba’s narrative of her experience can and must resonate beyond the sinking of her own body. As Margherita Marras puts it, in her reading of the play, “non è casuale che il corpo della protagonista sia funzionalmente vincolato a un concetto sospeso ma non immobile. Un’intelligente creazione poetica permette a Prosa di associare la

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<sup>61</sup> “fly around in the dark water like stringy seaweeds”

‘voce annegante’ di Shauba a una sorta di sincope apneica prolungata che diventa antidoto al muto disfacimento della carne.”<sup>62</sup> (Marras 120) Prosa’s Mediterranean narrative of migration can affect, challenge, and ultimately disrupt the dominant narrative. Thus, the performative narrative of the play sustains the event and is created by it, as Mahama’s “sforzo con la lingua”<sup>63</sup> (Prosa 18) is intended to enhance the movement of the boat, while, at the same time, her own voice can reach beyond the boat itself.

This is why Mahama’s f’s are ultimately reassuring for Shauba, as “la quantità delle effe non è un ostacolo. / Lo sono i fatti. / Sono spruzzi di sabbia sulla lingua.”<sup>64</sup> (Prosa 17) When the events obtrude, the narrative of them as well finds obstacles on its path, but it nevertheless embraces these obstacles and modulates itself in accordance with them. As in the case of Leopardi’s hedge, the obstacle can ultimately enhance the imagination of “infinite spaces” beyond the apparent restriction it imposes. “Spurts of sand” on one’s tongue, the f’s also bring back to Shauba, shipwrecked in the middle of the sea, “un certo sapore di terra,”<sup>65</sup> (Prosa 19) so that they seem to help Shauba reach up from the abyss to the land. Mahama is herself the land, while Shauba, who on stage, before starting to speak, “*rimugina come un’onda che ricade su se stessa*,”<sup>66</sup> (Prosa 17) identifies with the “innocent sea” that is not only “testimone passivo,”<sup>67</sup> (Marras 123) but participates in her own drama. Mahama is “la passione della lingua lanciata a parlare,”<sup>68</sup> (Prosa 19) while Shauba is all encapsulated in her own monologue. Together, they narrate migration as a journey that bridges land and sea, Italy and Africa, hence challenging the contemporary militarization of the borders across the whole Mediterranean. The fluid space of

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<sup>62</sup> “Not by chance the protagonist’s body is functionally bound to a concept that is suspended but not static. A smart poetic creation allows Prosa to associate Shaba’s ‘drowning voice’ with a sort of prolonged apnoeic syncope that becomes an antidote to the mute decomposition of the flesh.”

<sup>63</sup> “effort with the tongue”

<sup>64</sup> “the quantity of f’s is not an obstacle. / Facts are. / They are spurts of sand on the tongue.”

<sup>65</sup> “a certain taste of land”

<sup>66</sup> “*ruminate as a wave that falls back on itself*”

<sup>67</sup> “passive witness”

<sup>68</sup> “the passion of the tongue excited to talk”

the Mediterranean Sea Prosa narrates ultimately rejects any nationalist declination that would highlight its frontiers. At the same time, it imposes itself as the “liquid materiality” capable of enhancing a dialogue across its own space. It is a sea that brings together, and does not actually separate, the sand of the African desert, which the figure of Mahama evokes throughout the play, and the sand that Shauba can, towards the end, only glimpse on a Lampedusa beach never to be reached. Only if the desert and the sea finally do meet, “the sea loses part of its character, at least the Mediterranean does,” (Matvejević 72) and acquires a new hybrid potentiality for the future.

The term “Africa,” which is spelled with a geminated “f” throughout the play, condenses this capacity of Prosa’s narrative act to “complicate and contaminate frames of time and space” of a Mediterranean that can, as such, become a model of “historical and cultural diversity washed by a shared marine medium.” (Chambers 2008: 137) The word “Affrica” acquires in Shauba’s monologue a tridimensional value, bringing together past, present, and future in and of the Mediterranean itself. It still contains the specter of Italian colonial past, being the spelling with the double “f” characteristic of the Tuscan vernacular of Ferdinando Martini, well-known governor of Eritrea and colonial traveler as well.<sup>69</sup> In the arrangement of Shauba’s journey, it also negatively impacts Mahama’s communication with the migration official, as he pretends not to understand her disrupted speech. However, the spelling mistake can ultimately be seen as a symbol of resistance to the norm, a glitch that allows movement and friction, creating “spurts of sand” as the very metaphorical space of a Mediterranean in which land and sea can ultimately coexist.

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<sup>69</sup> See Martini, Ferdinando. *Nell’Affrica Italiana* 1895.

### Mediterranean Narrative Movement

Movement within space is then Shauba's ultimate resource, the only way to counteract the annihilation of death. It is the movement of her boat within the space of the Mediterranean Sea, where migrants' "unseaworthy boats" can stop being spaces of invisibility," (Mazzara 452) and instead reclaim their own visibility. It is also the movement of the narrative, within a Mediterranean space that both creates and is created by it, against the immobility of a threatening silence. As Mahama's voice suggests, "non si muove nulla nei luoghi dell'eternità," (Prosa 32) and "niente accade se non ci si può muovere dentro le cose."<sup>70</sup> (Prosa 25) Since Shauba lacks eternity, this lack is an opportunity to make her own narrative of the events visible, beyond and despite the material conditions of a tragic reality that tends to silence it.

The coming together of different voices within Shauba's own monologue also enhances movement within the space of the narrative. The point of view of the entire play never shifts, constantly focused on the protagonist and narrator of her own story. Undoubtedly, Shauba's counter-narrative of migration gets value from the very fact of being narrated, in the first person, through the voice of its doubly subaltern female African protagonist.<sup>71</sup> However, since the first line of the drama and throughout its entire development, Shauba's uninterrupted monologue reveals a multifocal dimension, as it unfolds through the interaction of various voices. Mahama's is clearly the second most prominent voice, as she frequently carries on imaginary dialogues with Shauba. Another female figure, the "Affricana," who acts as the "problem-solver" in the African community of Shauba's native village, raises her own voice against capitalist exploitation, contributing to the significant dimension of female agency that clearly emerges from Prosa's play. The play does not portray an equally significant dimension of male agency, as all the male characters only have a negative connotation, being ultimately

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<sup>70</sup> "nothing moves in the space of eternity," and "nothing happens if one cannot move within things."

<sup>71</sup> For a discussion of the gender significance of Prosa's character, see Marras 2014.

responsible, but not even intentionally, for the capsizing. Nevertheless, the voice of the immigrant traffickers, which only consists of threats and obscene language, still participates in the polyphony of the narrative. Shauba's internal dialogism, as I would define it in Bakhtin's terms, portrays her own Mediterranean as irreducible to a single unity, leaving space for the many incommensurable voices that speak, and ask to be heard, through it.<sup>72</sup> This simultaneous occurrence of different voices in the singular space of Shauba's monologue aims to challenge any unilateral perspective, while creating a diffractive, rhizomatic narrative of migration.<sup>73</sup>

The dimension of movement, which manifests itself in the concurrence of different temporalities in the simultaneous space of the narrative, as well in the continuous shifting from one voice to the other in the single space of Shauba's monologue, characterizes the ultimate suspended condition of Shauba's physical and narrative journey across the Mediterranean. In her address to the Italian President, Shauba imagines spying on his computer, becoming a hacker in order to wreak havoc on his unfair laws. Since, as she acknowledges, she does not master the English language, she misspells the word "hacker" as "iccaro."

("Shauba/Iccaro/Haccker girerà nuda tra le sue leggi"<sup>74</sup> Prosa 34) This last word sounds very similar to "Icaro," Italian name for "Icarus," the mythological figure who tragically desired to fly too high in the sky, and ended up falling into the sea below him. Although Shauba will not manage to be a computer-hacker on the Italian soil she will never reach, she can somehow be an Icarus on the Mediterranean Sea she is crossing.

The Greek mythological character Shauba alludes to here is definitely an ambiguous figure, punished similarly to Dante's Ulysses for the *hybris* of his "folle volo,"<sup>75</sup> namely for his irrepressible desire to go beyond the limits imposed on human beings. And yet, the figure of

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<sup>72</sup> See Bakhtin 1981.

<sup>73</sup> On the concept of rhizome, see Deleuze and Guattari 1987.

<sup>74</sup> "Shauba/Iccarus/Hacker will move, naked, around his laws"

<sup>75</sup> "crazy flight"

Icarus, similarly to Dante's Ulysses, is able to suggest, by virtue of his own tragic destiny, alternative ways of imagining and giving value to the "volo" itself. The sun Icarus strives for is, in the end, an impossible destination, so that the movement upwards only results into a fall down into the sea's abyss. In this perspective, it is the space in-between the sky and the abyss – a space that witnesses and sustains the movement itself – that becomes the most significant. This space, which requires a constant effort in order to be experienced and inhabited, is also the only one available at the end, as both the way forward – towards the sun – and the way back – to the labyrinth – are ultimately precluded.<sup>76</sup> In the same way, as we have already pointed out, Shauba cannot either reach Lampedusa or go back to her native African village, so that her only possibility is to be a living and narrative testimony within the space of the Mediterranean Sea she moves across. It is a space that extends horizontally, on the surface of the sea, but that also allows a potential vertical dimension of movement. Shauba's physical and narrative movement, both real and imaginary at the same time, towards the sky and down into the abyss, challenges the supposed flatness of the sea, revealing instead its spatial and temporal depth.

Finally, the centrality of movement within a Mediterranean space that enables it, while being at the same time created by it, sustains the development of Prosa's whole trilogy. In *Lampedusa Beach* there is both a physical and a narrative movement, as Shauba both performs and narrates her own journey across the sea. However, as we have seen, the incessant movement of words within the space of Shauba's monologue is what ultimately performs the action, compensating for the stasis of the acting. Moreover, while Shauba's physical journey does at the end fall victim to the obstacles that determine its impossible fulfillment, the narrative of it does not surrender to the events, while potentially extending beyond the tragic

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<sup>76</sup> In the well-known Greek myth I am referring to, Daedalus, Icarus' father, crafts two pairs of wings out of wax in order to escape from the labyrinth he had himself created for Crete's king Minos, and in which the king has then imprisoned him.

outcome of the shipwreck. In the other two plays that constitute the trilogy, the narrative dimension of movement becomes more and more prevalent over the physical movement of the characters both on stage and in the narrative space of their own stories. Thus, the narrative movement of words becomes the ultimate, and necessary, resistance that needs to be put in play against the recurrent threat of physical immobility and silence.

In *Lampedusa Snow*, the protagonist Mohamed tells the story of his own quasi-static itinerary on the Italian Alps. As it is the case for the actress in *Lampedusa Beach*, here as well the actor is sitting on a chair, alone on stage, for the entire single act of his performance. Once again, then, it is the narrative development of the character's polyphonic monologue that guarantees the dramatic movement of the play itself. Similarly to Mahama, the African engineer Mohamed firmly believes in the movement of things across space, as he describes his own job as the constant effort to put things "in maniera tale / che accada qualcosa."<sup>77</sup> (Prosa 47) His migratory journey has apparently fulfilled his need for movement, as his migrants' boat does not get shipwrecked on the Mediterranean Sea, and he does reach Shauba's imagined sand of Lampedusa. However, he is immediately moved from the island to a lodge on the Italian northern mountains, and his dramatic monologue narrates the months he ends up spending there, waiting in vain for a residence permit. The static condition of his containment in the mountain cabin seems to annihilate the potentiality of a continuing narrative movement inherent in Shauba's suspended condition of shipwreck. The realm of Mohamed's possibilities, or rather of his impossibilities – "Io non posso morire. / Io non posso annegare,"<sup>78</sup> (Prosa 49) as he immediately realizes – seems ultimately to entrap him in the same condition of eternity that Shauba had rejected for its threatening immobility.

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<sup>77</sup> "in a way that would make something happen."

<sup>78</sup> "I can't die. / I can't drown"



In the face of this discouraging condition of eternity, the image of the shipwreck loses any potentially positive connotation, as Mohamed only feels like a “naufrago nel silenzio”<sup>79</sup> (Prosa 50) of his own fear and solitude. However, a dialogue with an old “Alpino” (an Italian soldier) leads him to reclaim the agency of his own destiny. If, at the beginning of the play, he thought that “il problema non è avanzare, ma resistere,”<sup>80</sup> (Prosa 46) now he realizes that the two actions are ultimately the same, as moving forward is the only feasible act of resistance he is left with. Then, once his physical resistance against the snow and the cold proves impossible – and his physical surrender becomes as inevitable as the drowning of Shauba’s body into the sea – it is once again the narrative that can still oppose resistance, as “la parola resiste più a lungo dell’uomo.”<sup>81</sup> (Prosa 70) As the Alpino tells Mohamed, revolution only consists in a movement of “scomparire e poi ricomparire.”<sup>82</sup> (Prosa 64) Mohamed’s body, as Shauba’s body before it, must surrender to the physical obstacles on its way, disappearing not in the sea’s abyss, but rather under the weight of the snow. However, Mohamed’s narrative effort keeps reappearing, resurfacing on the very space of the Mediterranean sea- and landscape that have enhanced it. Fighting until the very end to delay the moment of falling into the time of eternity, Mohamed’s voice draws on the snow the same line that he had already drawn on the sea at the moment of his Mediterranean passage: “Io conosco il navigare. / Qui lo chiamano sciare / Lasciare una scia. / Ricordo la mia sul mare.”<sup>83</sup> (Prosa 59) This act of narrative resistance is what ultimately prevents the trace of his whole journey – both horizontal, across the sea’s surface, and vertical, from Lampedusa to the Italian Alps – from being deleted. In this way, the narrative memory of Mohamed’s individual experience of migration cannot be easily dismissed.

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<sup>79</sup> “castaway in the silence”

<sup>80</sup> “the problem is not to go forward, but rather to resist”

<sup>81</sup> “a word resists longer than a man.”

<sup>82</sup> “disappearing and then reappearing.”

<sup>83</sup> “I know sailing. Here they call it skiing. To leave a trail. I remember mine on the sea.”

In *Lampedusa Way*, the last play of the trilogy, the internal dialogism that characterizes both Shauba's and Mohamed's dramatic monologues becomes external, as the narrative action develops through a dialogue between Mahama and Saif, Mohamed's uncle. The two actors are again sitting on a chair for the entire time of their performance, their feet immersed in the sand. It is the sand of a Lampedusa beach they have landed on, so that, as in Mohamed's case, their journey has been apparently successful. However, the dynamic movement of their dialogue desperately attempts to cover the feeling of entrapment and hopelessness that becomes more and more tangible, as the man and the woman wait in vain to get news about Shauba and Mohamed. Then, Lampedusa beach finally reveals the heterotopic nature of its own space.<sup>84</sup> A paradisiac dream-land never to be reached in Shauba's account, here the Italian island becomes the location of a mournful waiting, a site of immobile quasi-detention for Mahama and Said, who, however, cannot refrain from somehow admiring and celebrating its natural beauty.

As it was already the case for Shauba, Mahama and Saif's journey does not imply the possibility of either a *nostos* or a way forward. There is no way back for them, as they would never leave the island without first getting some answers. Thus, their presence on the island bears witness, in the first instance, to Shauba's and Mohamed's lives, as it intends to preserve and reactivates the memory of the two migrants in their individualities. The answers they are looking for, however, are evidently not destined to arrive. The only space that remains available to Mahama and Saif's agency is the present space on the coast of a Mediterranean Sea on which they keep witnessing new migrants' shipwrecks. Here, they acknowledge the precariousness of their own condition on a "beach cemetery [...] the repository of countless refugee dead, the unmarked grave site in which the drowned victims become mere bodies of water" (Pugliese 124): "Saif: l'acqua è molle, non ci regge... Mahama: gli Affricani riusciranno mai a navigare

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<sup>84</sup> See Pugliese 2009 and Mazzara 2016.

sulla materia solida?”<sup>85</sup> (Prosa 86) However, against the threat of a “liquid modernity” that the sea seems to carry, Mahama and Saif’s own narrative can and must strive to restore the fluid materiality of the sea, which in turn can sustain their lives and their narratives.

As Mahama and Saif refuse to leave Lampedusa and to go back, dissatisfied with the responses to their questions, they become “clandestine” on the island, which is the last space available to them. If Lampedusa is, as Federica Mazzara suggests, an example of Edward Soja’s “third space” of migrants’ “visibility and invisibility,” (Mazzara 452) then the migrants’ ultimate form of resistance, as in the case of Mohamed, involves a movement of appearing and disappearing: “Saif: bisogna scomparire, ma come? Mahama: lo faremo poco a poco, come avviene nel naufragio... prima mettiamo in atto la furiosa resistenza del naufragio... il resto lo affronteremo al momento.”<sup>86</sup> (Prosa 103)

Contrary to what happens to Shauba and Mohamed, Mahama and Saif are not going to face a tragic death within the space of the play, so that their narrative resistance is not destined to end, but rather to extend beyond the space of the play itself. As the title of the last piece of the trilogy suggests, then, Lampedusa can offer a way to act in the present, while also bearing witness to the past and imagining a future. Ultimately, *Lampedusa Way* reaffirms the potentiality inherent in Shauba’s suspended condition of her narrative shipwreck, which puts in place a constant movement of resistance. At the same time, the last play also points toward open possibilities for a real and narrative future to be realized.

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<sup>85</sup> “Saif: the water is soft, it cannot hold us... Mahama: would the Affricans ever be able to navigate on a solid substance?”

<sup>86</sup> “Saif: we need to disappear, but how? Mahama: we will do it little by little, as it happens in a shipwreck... first, we need to put up the furious resistance of the castaway... we’ll face the rest on the night.”

## II. The Windy Voices of Libyan Women

### Migration and Resistance in Razan Moghrabi's Novel

*Winds blow counter to what the ship wants.*  
Arabic Proverb

The Libyan novel *Le donne del vento arabo* [*Women of the Wind*]<sup>87</sup> by Razan Moghrabi offers an alternative narrative of migration that, from the opposite and yet so close shore of the Mediterranean, mirrors Lina Prosa's Sicilian play. Not only do Prosa's and Moghrabi's works obviously belong to quite different literary genres within very different literary traditions, but they also come from two distinct countries, Italy and Libya, whose relationship within the same Mediterranean space has been profoundly shaped by colonialism first and migration itself later. When reading the novel in parallel to the play, it becomes clear that the two works ultimately complement and resonate with each other. Both the play and the novel complicate a dominant and unitary narrative of migration, while also advocating a dimension of narrative agency and resistance within a renewed, and shared, Mediterranean space.

*Women of the Wind*, first published in 2011, narrates the "successful" migratory journey from Libya to Italy of a Moroccan woman, Bahija, who manages in the end to settle in France. The story of her Mediterranean passage evolves in parallel with the story of a diverse group of women, whose lives get mixed up within the space of the building – and the larger space of the city – in which they live and constantly interact with one another. Although Bahija does not live in that same building, she works in some of these women's apartments, so that she is both the

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<sup>87</sup> Throughout the chapter, I refer to and quote from the Italian translation of the novel, which came out in 2011, just one year after the publication of the Arabic original. Moghrabi's book has not been translated into English, although excerpts of it can be found on the web section InTranslation of *The Brooklyn Rail*. It is interesting to note that, while the English version of the title, by which the book is referred to in the Western literary market, translates the Arabic literally, the Italian title contains a word that is not present in the original. In the Italian title, the wind is qualified as "Arab," so that the Italian reader is immediately required to note, and acknowledge, a dimension of otherness, which has a very clear geo-political, as well as cultural, connotation.

protagonist of her own story, and a character within these other intertwined stories. One of the women who live in the building, who is only and always referred to in the book as la Scrittrice [*the Writer*], is also the internal narrator of the novel, and her character emerges through her own narration of the interactions with the other women. I will come back to the complex narrative structure of the book, as it is significant for my reading of the novel in terms of the Mediterranean narrative it proposes and entails. However, the brief account I just offered already provides a glimpse of the simultaneous and polyphonic dimensions of Moghrabi's novel; dimensions that clearly align the novel with aspects of Prosa's play I pointed out in the first part of the chapter. *Women of the Wind*, in other words, also create a polyphonic narrative of migration, where the lived experience of the Mediterranean passage cannot be separated from its narrative. At the same time, this alternative and fragmented narrative is able to recover the multilayered and global dimension of contemporary Mediterranean crossings, problematizing normalized conceptions of departure and arrival, while focusing once again on the potentiality of movement itself.

#### A Simultaneous, Diachronic, and Polyphonic Narrative Journey

As in the case of Prosa's play, Moghrabi's work also develops through two different, and simultaneous, levels of the journey embedded within the single narrative space of the novel. First, there is obviously Bahija's physical journey from Libya to Italy (and more extensively, from Morocco to France), which recalls the real, and dramatic, event of Shauba's Mediterranean crossing. Secondly, there is the narration of the journey itself. As we have seen, this whole narration occurs in Prosa's play through the only, and sovereign, voice of the protagonist. At the very time of her drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, Shauba recalls fragments of her past, testifies to her tragic present, and claims a negated, but nevertheless still

envisioned, Mediterranean future. In Moghrabi's novel, the narration of Bahija's Mediterranean passage does not occur in the first-person voice, nor is it, contrary to Shauba's journey, simultaneous to the event itself. Bahija's journey is narrated already in the past, as it is supposed to have occurred one year before the time of the narration and the time of our reading ("Accadde lo scorso anno in una notte d'estate,"<sup>88</sup> Moghrabi 11).

However, during her Mediterranean crossing Bahija is supposed to record her own voice, to "registrare tutto ciò che vedeva, anzi, persino ciò che sentiva"<sup>89</sup> (Moghrabi 14) on a small recording device that she is carrying at the Writer's request. This "metallic memory," which the Writer gets back nine months after Bahija's departure, is what makes possible the ultimate, written narrative of Bahija's own journey. It is then, in a way, as if the journey and its narration are once again simultaneous, as the time of writing the story here coincides with the time of listening to it from the tape, which in turn coincides with the time of living it, as the recording took place in real-time.

Moreover, if, as Prosa herself pointed out, her time of writing Shauba's story was coincident with the time of Shauba's own drowning, Moghrabi's time of writing also somehow coincides with the development of Bahija's journey. As I already explained with reference to Prosa's play, here as well the simultaneity between the events and the narration of them extends beyond the level of the narrator to the level of the author. The author's voice, in other words, must be heard through the voice of the external narrator of the novel, who is called to arrange the story the Writer does not ultimately manage to write,<sup>90</sup> as she notes at the very beginning of the novel: "Ho preso i CD su cui ho riversato le parole di Bahija [...] ho messo tutto in una

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<sup>88</sup> "It happened last year, in a summer night"

<sup>89</sup> "register all that she would see, or rather, even what she would hear"

<sup>90</sup> This explains why the Writer says she has received the tape nine months after Bahija's departure, while the very first sentence of the third chapter, in which Bahija's story begins to unfold, situates her journey one year before. A few months, then, have passed since the Writer got the tape, in which the other writer, whom I believe must be seen as the author herself, has prepared the story she is now, twelve months later, writing.

grossa busta e l'ho consegnato a una vera scrittrice che ha già pubblicato un romanzo. Può darsi che lei riesca là dove io ho fallito.”<sup>91</sup> (Moghrabi 10)

As was already the case in *Lampedusa Beach*, different temporalities also coexist within the single space of *Women of the Wind*. First of all, we have Bahija's own migratory journey across the Mediterranean, which occupies, once again simultaneously, the space-times of the past, the present, and the future, so as to finally get a diachronic dimension. The journey happens all in one night, “secondo la Scrittrice, la notte delle donne del vento,”<sup>92</sup> (Moghrabi 25) but the narrative spans much further, beyond the time frame of that single night, since the multiple voices of the women travel back and forth, as winds do, across the Mediterranean. The novel ends when Bahija is still on the Italian island of Lampedusa, but the reader already knows, from the Writer's own words in the second chapter, that in the present time she is already in France, as the journey is already in the past. Not only, then, does the narrative of the migratory journey situate itself both in the past and in the present, but it also significantly opens towards the dimension of the future.

It is the narrative of the journey – or rather it is the journey of the narrative itself, which moves freely in the space of the book from one space-time to the other – that creates the link among these different temporalities. It is not a coincidence that, as for Shauba, here too there is no going back for the person who experiences the passage: Bahija cannot undertake Ulysses' *nostos*, but can only move forward, towards further journeys and destinations. However, as in the case of the coconut bowl Shauba had taken with her on the boat and wished would be sent back to her African country, here there is “il ritorno della memoria,”<sup>93</sup> (Moghrabi 9) as the recorded tape does travel back from France to Libya. The object exposed in the museum, in the

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<sup>91</sup> “I took the CDs on which I transferred Bahija's words [...] I put everything in a large envelope and I handed it to a proper writer who has already published a novel. Maybe she will succeed where I failed.”

<sup>92</sup> “according to the Writer, the night of the women of the wind”

<sup>93</sup> “the return of memory”

first case, and the recorded tape of Bahija's own narrative voice, in the second case, thus manage to become present testimonies of the migratory journey itself. The tape in particular, which can be played again and again, in a potentially infinite movement forward and backward within the narrative itself, does not only endlessly recall the past happening of the journey, but also envisions infinite possible outcomes for its future. The technological device, in other words, allows resistance within both the physical space of the boat and the narrative space of the journey. It sustains Bahija's own migration and, beyond it, by virtue of its own reproducible narrative dimension, makes possible its own back and forth journey across the whole Mediterranean space.

The diachronic dimension of the novel also extends beyond the single, and main event of Bahija's Mediterranean passage through both the Writer's voice and the voice of the external narrator, as the two constantly alternate throughout the novel. In the chapters in which the Writer speaks through her own first-person voice, the stories of the different "women of the wind" emerge, as the Writer recalls the various moments, and the development, of her own interaction with them. At the same time, throughout the development of Bahija's own journey – which is narrated, as I said, in the third person –, different memories emerge, all connected to Bahija's own recent or more remote past, which also includes interaction with the other women.

Moreover, within the consistent shifts, structured through the alternation of the different chapters, between the first- and the third-person narrators, not only are various memories and different times brought together and made to interact with each other, but other voices emerge too. As in the case of Shauba's monologue, here as well first-person voices claim their space within the main narrative voice(s). The third-person narrative of Bahija's Mediterranean passage, then, leaves space to Bahija's own voice, which appears in the direct speech of her dialogues with other migrants on the boat. Also, the third-person narrative allows the voice of



another woman, Umm Farah, to emerge in order to tell her own story. The story is that of her failed attempt to migrate, whose retelling haunts and troubles Bahija during her own migratory journey.

At the same time, in the chapters in which the Writer speaks in the first person, her voice is far from being the only one heard. The other women of the building speak through their first-person narratives and tell their stories in their own voices. One of these women, Yosra, makes her voice heard in the novel not only through the direct speech of her dialogues with the Writer, but also through her own writings, as extracts of her notebook constitute two whole chapters within the novel itself.

In this way, although at first it seems that the only first-person voice, the only “I” in the whole novel, is the Writer’s, the emergence and coexistence of different voices clearly destabilizes any unilateral perspective on the narrative itself, which gets diffracted into a multiplicity of concurrent voices. The narrative can only exist, and develop, in a Mediterranean co-participated, hence inevitably also fragmented, dimension. Also, it might at first appear surprising, if not problematic, that Bahija, the protagonist of her own physical and narrative experience of migration, does not speak for herself in the space of the novel (as Shauba does, instead, in Prosa’s play).<sup>94</sup> However, apart from the fact that, as I said, Bahija does interact in the first-person in the space of the migrants’ boat, it is also important to note that it is precisely her own voice, recorded on tape, that makes the whole narrative ultimately possible. Significantly, the work includes an interesting passage in which the third-person voice switches to the Writer’s first-person voice within a single chapter, quite significantly entitled *Bahija e la Scrittrice* [*Bahija and the Writer*]. First, there is a short dialogue between the two, reported through the external narrator’s point of view: “La Scrittrice le aveva risposto distratta: ‘Certo, lo

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<sup>94</sup> On the question of the subalterns’ voice and of who speaks for whom, see Spivak’s seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988).

ha dipinto un famoso artista libico.’ All’improvviso [Bahija] aveva ritirato la mano [...] chiedendo: ‘Questo stesso quadro era in casa del signor Abdelmajid...’<sup>95</sup> (Moghrabi 137) Immediately after this exchange, a verb form in the first person strikes and disorients the reader: “Non capii nulla in quel momento, quando Bahija mi colpì...”<sup>96</sup> (Moghrabi 137) Here, it is as if the two figures become interchangeable, as one reclaims her narrative voice over the voice of the other. At the same time, the two points of view get confused with each other, and the reader suddenly finds quite difficult to discern whose “I” is the one appearing in the passage. Thus, Bahija’s voice ultimately resonates through the Writer’s own voice, as their narrative journeys also somehow develop one against, and in the light of, the other.

The diachronic simultaneity of the different journeys that take place throughout Moghrabi’s novel affirms once again, as in Prosa’s play, the impossible distinction, within the space of the Mediterranean, between the experience itself and the narration of it. Bahija’s own Mediterranean journey only happens in the space of her own – complexly mediated – narrative of it. Moreover, the very complex narrative structure of the novel, in which, as I pointed out, many voices alternate and speak at different narrative times, testifies to the impossible unity of the narrative itself. In *Women of the Wind*, the narrative can only happen through diffraction and multi-vocality, or, in Bakhtinian terms, through “heteroglossia,” where many coexistent and even opposing points of view are simultaneously present.<sup>97</sup> Both these impossibilities – namely of separation between experience and narration and of unitary narrative – which once again Moghrabi’s novel shares with Prosa’s play, are at the core of the potentiality of the novel itself to put forward an alternative narrative of migration, within a renewed complex conception of the space in which the very phenomenon of migration occurs. The story, as the journey and the

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<sup>95</sup> “The Writer had replied to her absentmindedly: ‘Of course, a famous Libyan artist painted it.’ Suddenly [Bahija] had withdrawn her hand [...] asking: ‘This same painting was in Mr. Abdelmajid’s house...’”

<sup>96</sup> “I did not understand anything at that time, when Bahija hit me...”

<sup>97</sup> See Bakhtin 1982.

whole Mediterranean that sustains it, is one and multiple at the same time; it is a dispersed unity that only comes out of difference.

### Women of Tripoli in their Apartments...

Bahija's migratory journey is undoubtedly the central focus of the novel, as its narrative develops throughout it and is, in its recorded evidence, the *conditio sine qua non* for the whole novel to be written. However, the chapters that focus on Bahija, and that revolve around the various moments of her migratory experience either on the boat or immediately out of it (right before boarding and right after landing), are regularly interspersed with chapters in which other stories, belonging to other women, gradually emerge. These "intrusions" into Bahija's main story are also a sort of narrative expansion of it, as most of these women also appear in some of Bahija's own memories, from the time she spent and interacted with them in the building. However, it might be unclear at first what the different stories and life trajectories of these other women add to the narrative dimension of migration the novel undoubtedly addresses. How do these stories even relate to the phenomenon of migration itself? Even though most of the women do not themselves migrate and although, with the exception of the Writer, they are even unaware of Bahija's imminent migratory journey, their life paths and their experiences are never static. The "women of the wind" who give the title to the novel keep constantly reclaiming, renegotiating and reacquiring the right to a physical and narrative movement they also constantly risk to lose. Thus, from a broader perspective, these women's narrative presence significantly recovers a whole – gendered – dimension of agency and resistance within the Mediterranean space; more precisely, within a specific Mediterranean space, the Libyan coast, that is often just considered the migration starting point of desperate and defenseless people, only dreaming of a better future away from it.

The only other woman in the novel who has directly experienced the Mediterranean migratory passage is the Iraqi Umm Farah, who, as I said, narrates her own story to Bahija before the Moroccan woman's own departure. It is apparently a story of deceit and failure, as the mediators who arranged Umm Farah's journey just made a profit out of false promises, and the boat came back to the original point shortly after its departure. However, the attempted, and failed, Mediterranean passage is not the first journey Umm Farah has undertaken, as she already moved years before from Iraq to Libya with her husband and her young daughter. For Umm Farah, "emigrare significa fuggire per non affrontare il destino in un solo luogo."<sup>98</sup> (Moghrabi 23) Thus, her journey from Iraq to Libya is certainly a painful escape from poverty and life precariousness, a hard decision to take, as she also left behind two young sons in Baghdad. However, it is also the conscious and voluntary choice to challenge the immobile fixity of one's own destiny, opening it to the uncertainty, and thus to the infinite possibilities, that movement and change carry with themselves.

The Mediterranean Sea that Umm Farah, enclosed in her native Iraqi village, had never seen before and sees for the first time in Libya, is the fluid materialization of the double dimension of fear and potentiality that the migratory movement implies. "Non conoscevo il mare, perciò non mi faceva paura [...] Non lo amavo e non lo odiavo. Poi, all'improvviso, scoprii che il mare è grande e spaventoso,"<sup>99</sup> (Moghrabi 27) Umm Farah tells Bahija. The newly acquired awareness of the risks associated with movement and change cannot help but bring about fear. However, the Mediterranean Sea, which "ha un carattere sempre mutevole,"<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> "to emigrate means to escape in order not to face one's own fate in a single place."

<sup>99</sup> "I didn't know the sea, which is why I was not afraid of it [...] I neither loved nor hated it. Then, suddenly, I discovered that the sea is big and frightening." As the title itself suggests, the first contact with the Mediterranean Sea raises similar mixed feelings of astonishment and fear in the Afghani young boy protagonist of Fabio Geda's *In the Sea there are Crocodiles*, first-person rendition of Enaiyatollah Akbadi's story that, in the context of Italian contemporary literature, similarly intends to address and recover the complexity of the migratory phenomenon.

<sup>100</sup> "has a character that is continuously changing"

(Moghrabi 170) can also, as it does in Bahija's own words, give "coraggio per l'avventura,"<sup>101</sup> sustaining with its own mutability the infinite mutations of the migrant's own life journey. At the same time, people from the southern shore of the Mediterranean tend to have a peculiar relationship with the sea, undoubtedly affected by the significant presence of the Sahara desert, which is both an obstacle on the way to the sea and itself another, parallel or counter, sea.<sup>102</sup>

If Umm Farah is the only one, among the various women of Moghrabi's novel, to have passed through both a fulfilled and a failed migratory experience, the dimension of physical movement variously informs the lives of the other women as well. Hosna, the secretary Bahija worked for in the past, has come, as Bahija herself has, from Morocco to Libya, leaving her child with Bahija, before moving back to Morocco and disappearing from Bahija's – and her own daughter's – life. Huda, one of the two other most prominent characters in the novel, moved from Libya to Tunisia, and then back to Libya, where she lives now. It is important to note that these back and forth trajectories are not presented as extraordinary in the novel. They are often told through the first-person voice of the woman who has lived them, and they are presented as a fundamental dimension of these women's own identities.

Movement, however, does not necessarily translate, in the novel, into the condition of diaspora and physical displacement that some of the women have gone through (whether voluntarily or otherwise). The three main characters (besides Bahija), Huda, Yosra, and the Writer, enter the novel through their multiple interactions in the interior spaces of the apartments, contained within the same single building, in which they live. What the Writer immediately describes as "una situazione possibile solo in un romanzo,"<sup>103</sup> (Moghrabi 55) is in fact the dramatic, more than narrative, situation of the women's recurrent meetings. As in

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<sup>101</sup> "courage for adventure"

<sup>102</sup> I come back to the relationship between the sea and the desert in the imaginary of people from the southern shore of the Mediterranean in the next chapter, when I focus on the desert narrative.

<sup>103</sup> "a situation that is only possible in a novel"

Prosa's play, drama and narrative are far from being positioned as opposites, as it is the theatrical situation that ultimately enhances the performative character of the narrative itself. The first meeting the Writer takes part in, which she also sees as the perfect incipit for a narration, soon becomes a common situation that keeps repeating, with few variations, throughout the novel: "La casa di Huda era un palcoscenico; ogni sera c'era uno spettacolo diverso o un ruolo nuovo per un'amica o qualche conoscenza. La mattina, invece, si tenevano incontri di donne davanti a una tazza di caffè, per discutere dell'accaduto della sera prima. In questa casa conobbi tutti quelli che sarebbero entrati a far parte del romanzo."<sup>104</sup> (Moghrabi 93) Every meeting is one and several meetings at the same time, and the recurrent dramatization of those encounters is what ultimately sustains the movement of the narrative itself.

Throughout the whole narrative space of the novel, and in the physical space of the building, the women keep looking for each other and interrogating each other, as the titles of the chapters themselves reveal: *Incontri delle donne del vento*, *Yosra e la Scrittrice*, *I segreti della casa di Huda*, *La Scrittrice interroga Huda*, *Yosra cerca la Scrittrice*, *Huda cerca la Scrittrice*.<sup>105</sup> In other words, each woman can only narratively emerge through her own interactions with the other women, through her own participation in the female chorus of all those moving and interconnected voices. The female character Sarah, in Assia Djébar's *Women of Algiers*, describes this condition of the women mirroring each other:

I see no other way out for us [women] except through an encounter like this: a woman speaking in front of another one who's watching; does the one who's

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<sup>104</sup> "Huda's house was a stage; there was a different show every night, or a new role for a friend or an acquaintance. In the morning, instead, there were women's meetings over a cup of coffee, in order to discuss what had happened the night before. In this house I met all the people who would have taken part in the novel."

<sup>105</sup> *Meetings of the women of the wind*, *Yosra and the Writer*, *The secrets of Huda's house*, *The Writer interrogates Huda*, *Yosra looks for the Writer*, *Huda looks for the Writer*.

speaking tell the story of the other one [...]? She who watches, is it by means of listening, of listening and remembering that she ends up seeing herself, with her own eyes, unveiled at last... (Djebar 47)

Thus, although the women all have different and specific life conditions, which do emerge, slowly, through their own narrative engagements with each other, the shared dimension of agency they all claim over their own life makes each of them one of the multiple declinations of a single woman.

“Chi erano queste donne?”<sup>106</sup> (Moghrabi 49) the Writer’s first-person voice asks herself at the beginning of the novel, and the entire novel materializes as the impossible attempt to give these women’s stories a proper, and conclusive, frame. Two of them, Huda and Yosra, emerge more fully than the others.<sup>107</sup> Huda, who has been married and divorced, is now in a secret marriage, whose condition she does not simply accept, but rather embraces as the secret husband provides her with the kind of life she wants: “Voglio che Adil continui a fare il marito che spende soldi per me, e in verità non mi vergogno a dirlo.”<sup>108</sup> (Moghrabi 95) Yosra, who has “mille facce e mille atteggiamenti diversi,”<sup>109</sup> (Moghrabi 110) never gives up looking for her emotional fulfillment out of the suffocating space of her own apartment, while she also somehow keeps abiding by her marital duties: “Faceva ogni sforzo, non risparmiava mai le energie. Ma intanto voleva tutto dalla vita, e nella misura maggiore possibile. E se il destino la contrastava ostinato, allora lei lo ingannava e faceva tutto il possibile per ottenere ciò che

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<sup>106</sup> “Who were these women?”

<sup>107</sup> As already mentioned, apart from Umm Farah, Bahija and the Writer, Huda and Yosra are the two women who also more frequently speak in a first-person voice. On the contrary, the other women, who I will not mention here as none of them is specifically relevant to my own reading of the novel, emerge more as side-characters in relation to, and within, these five women’s stories.

<sup>108</sup> “I want Adil to keep being the husband who spends money for me, and I am not ashamed to say it.”

<sup>109</sup> “a thousand faces and a thousand different attitudes”

voleva.”<sup>110</sup> (Moghrabi 73) They all face challenges, as their own constant movements across the space-time of their own lives involve an inherent condition of risk that they cannot, and do not want, to refuse. Even if they are not – as Bahija and Umm Farah are – physically moving across different Mediterranean locations, nevertheless they keep consciously and endlessly trespassing the boundaries that, within their own Mediterranean space, their specific condition within the larger society tries to impose on them. As Judy el-Bushra argues in her study of women’s political activism in the Arab world, these women find ways to “exercise agency in the pursuit of self-identified goals,” as their “lack of formal power does not deprive them of their capability of resistance.” (el-Bushra 80)

The women in Moghrabi’s novel do not live exactly in a “domestic harem,” like the one in which Fatima Mernissi grew up in Morocco during the ‘40s and ‘50s. There, as Mernissi recalls, “women dreamed of trespassing all the times,” (Mernissi 1-2) as a high arch with large wooden doors separated them from the city life beyond.<sup>111</sup> Even though Moghrabi’s characters live in modern apartments that overlook the sea, and their lives are not entirely constrained within the walls of their own building, the Libyan society that shines through the novel is still very strict and conservative, especially in terms of women’s rights. As the Writer acknowledges, “le leggi libiche sono severissime per tutto ciò che riguarda le donne, dal matrimonio alle conseguenze di una relazione illecita e segreta.”<sup>112</sup> (Moghrabi 129) Since the novel came out in 2011, it must be still referring to the Libya under the rule of colonel Gaddafi, whose allegedly “progressive” attitude towards women would have helped them reach some

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<sup>110</sup> “She made all kind of efforts, and never saved her energies. However, at the same time she wanted everything from her life, and to the greatest possible extent. And, if destiny tenaciously obstructed her, then she would deceive it, and would do everything possible in order to obtain what she wanted.”

<sup>111</sup> In the domestic harem Mernissi describes, various related families shared a single space, though they had their own separate units. All the windows looked inside towards the large central courtyard, while all the women’s movements outside of the space of the harem were controlled and very limited.

<sup>112</sup> “Libyan laws are very strict with regard to anything related to women, from marriage to the consequences of an illicit and secret relationship.”



level of emancipation. However, as Alnaas and Pratt point out in their study of female bodies in post-revolution Libya, “like other nationalist discourses, Gaddafi promoted women’s participation in public as a symbol of the country’s modernization, whilst controlling women’s sexuality in the name of Libya’s ‘Islamic Identity.’” (Alnaas and Pratt 157) In other words, even though the condition of women seems to have been getting worse in Libya after the fall of Gaddafi’s regime, this does not mean that they had indeed acquired a substantial level of personal freedom under the regime itself.

However, in the narrative space of the novel women do find their alternative paths to personal fulfillment, resisting against the traditional and coercive environment that surrounds them. One of the acts that remained illegal under Gaddafi’s regime, “unlike the Tunisia of Habib Bourguiba, North Africa’s proclaimed champion of Arab feminism,” (Roger 186-7) is abortion. Both Yosra and Huda voluntarily choose not to abide by Libyan laws, but rather find, through women’s reciprocal support, the way to go precisely to Tunisia in order to undergo abortions. More broadly, Moghrabi’s women are able to turn the apparent enclosing immobility of their building into a narrative and dynamic battlefield where they reach awareness of their options, and plan their own moves accordingly. They are both “*le donne del palazzo*”<sup>113</sup> (Moghrabi 18) and “*le donne del vento*,” where one condition does not erase the other, while the two are interdependent. They both live inside the building’s walls, thus at least partially conditioned by the social and personal rules of this enclosed space, and move out of it, in the space that the continuous interaction of their windy narrative voices creates and sustains. In other words, the women narratively “blow” through the interior space in which they interact their own personal aspirations and needs, creating a narrative movement that can only enhance their own metaphorical and physical movement outside the enclosed space itself.

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<sup>113</sup> the women of the building”

### ... and Outside

Although, as I said, the women's interactions, and their narrative exchanges, mostly happen in the interior spaces of the apartments within the building in which they either live or work, they also sometimes move outside the building itself. It is a limited movement, as they are constantly aware of, and careful about the looks they might attract. Nevertheless, making use of the support of each other's presence, they find their own spaces and negotiate their journeys in the outside space of Tripoli. It is not only through the various movements of the women that the space of the city gets to the forefront of the narrative. Rather, a few short chapters within the novel focus explicitly on the city. Thus, they testify to the particular role of the city within the narrative, while also further contributing to the narrative movement itself, as they add a third thread to the two main narrative threads (namely the Writer's first-person narrative and the third-person narrative of Bahija's journey).

The whole novel significantly starts with one of these short chapters, which intends to highlight in particular "il carattere sempre mutevole di Tripoli."<sup>114</sup> (Moghrabi 7) As the women keep moving in the attempt to negotiate their own space within the larger space of the city, the city itself moves in order to constantly renegotiate its own space within the global world. Contrary to the stereotyped image, and the dominant narrative, of the backwardness and immobility of the southern Mediterranean, supposedly reluctant to change, the dimension of movement is precisely what characterizes Tripoli, where "non è per niente sicuro che una memoria resti inalterata, perché la città è in perenne movimento. I luoghi non se ne stanno immobili, ma mutano con fare sorprendente e inaspettato."<sup>115</sup> (Moghrabi 9) In the face of

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<sup>114</sup> "Tripoli's constantly changing character."

<sup>115</sup> "it is not certain at all that a memory would stay unchanged, since the city moves constantly. Places do not stay still, but rather they change in a surprising and unexpected way."

globalization, the city feels and responds to the need to adjust the pace of its own movement, and to make room for “nuove tradizioni.”<sup>116</sup> (Moghrabi 9)

This does not mean, however, that the city does not exercise any form of resistance against the fast and alienating movement that globalization itself requires. Rather, Tripoli participates in a kind of Mediterranean local movement that, as I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter and will focus on in the next chapter, implies adjustment to the global, while resisting globalizing threats of annihilation. From this perspective, the city as it emerges from Moghrabi’s narrative makes use of what Eric Sheppard describes as “positionality,” namely “the resistance strategy” by which the local place constantly renegotiates its own “position in relational space/time within globalization.” (Sheppard 307) Tripoli faces and responds to the challenges of globalization by means of its own movement within the Mediterranean space to which it belongs, opening towards the sea, while also clinging on to its terrestrial dimension: “Ogni sera Tripoli si accontenta [...] di appoggiarsi sul cuscino della sua spiaggia sabbiosa. Sprofonda nel sonno mentre l’umanità si desta per vendicarsi ancora su di lei, spargendo in mare i propri errori dopo aver bevuto le sue acque pure.”<sup>117</sup> (Moghrabi 48) In other words, only within the space of a Mediterranean in which the sand of the land meets and ultimately reconciles its own relationship with the water of the sea, Tripoli can ultimately deploy its own “positionality.”

In this perspective, Tripoli also challenges Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between smooth and striated spaces.<sup>118</sup> According to the French philosophers, the city, striated space *par excellence* characterized by measurability and dimensionality, is the opposite of the sea, the smooth space of directionality, occupied by sonorous and tactile qualities more than by visual

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<sup>116</sup> “new traditions.”

<sup>117</sup> “Every night, Tripoli is content with leaning on the pillow of her sandy beach. She sinks into sleep, while humanity wakes up to get revenge on her, spreading its own mistakes at sea after drinking her pure waters.”

<sup>118</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari 1987.

qualities. As Deleuze and Guattari note, however, both these categories of space only exist in a mixed form, so the philosophers' own distinction does not work as a binary opposition; rather, in the case of Mediterranean cities – and of Moghrabi's Tripoli in particular – the juxtaposition between smooth and striated can only work if taken to the extremes. In the Mediterranean space of Tripoli, in other words, the city and the sea tend towards each other to the point that they can finally coincide with each other. If the fluid materiality of the sea, in Iain Chambers' words, defies any "nationalist framing of the Mediterranean space [that] invariably emphasizes frontiers, borders, boundaries," (Chambers 2) then the people of the Mediterranean, as Matvejević notes, feel closer to their cities than to their nations (Matvejević 16) precisely because the Mediterranean city, like the sea, "is a process; it changes, and the accumulation of traces can rarely be eradicated. Its tempo is never single."<sup>119</sup> (Chambers 2)

Significantly, "la vecchia Tripoli,"<sup>120</sup> to which another short chapter of the novel is devoted, "è vicina al mare e conserva l'odore delle case dei pescatori."<sup>121</sup> (Moghrabi 91) This old part of the city is clearly under the threat of losing its character and ultimately disappearing, as most of its inhabitants have deserted it under the pressure of globalization. However, "da lontano essa li guarda con l'occhio di chi annega: solo i poeti hanno udito il suo lamento e sono tornati."<sup>122</sup> (Moghrabi 91) As Shauba does, Tripoli itself, on the edge of drowning, keeps resisting, firmly looking at its people with its Cyclopean eye.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, as in Shauba's case,

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<sup>119</sup> Chambers refers more specifically to the ex-colonial cities of Europe, but his concepts also apply to the ex-colonized cities of Africa, like Tripoli, which as well are "open archives [...] crossed by multiple histories and cultures." (Chambers 2) In the space of Moghrabi's novel, this "thick" historical and cultural dimension of Tripoli emerges through the women's own movements across it. From the terrace of a café, the Writer and Huda cannot avoid noticing "la rovina e la mescolanza di civiltà diverse," ("the ruin and the mix of different civilizations") as the arch of Marcus Aurelius "troneggiava" ("stood out," Moghrabi 100) next to old houses and renovated buildings, while a little further away the traffic flows along the street named after Omar Mukhtar, the leader of the Libyan resistance against the Italian colonial occupation.

<sup>120</sup> "the old Tripoli"

<sup>121</sup> "is close to the sea and keeps the smell of fishermen's houses."

<sup>122</sup> "she looks at them from afar, with the eye of someone who is drowning: only the poets heard her lament and came back."

<sup>123</sup> In the next chapter, I address the specific meaning of the Cyclops in the Mediterranean narrative context.

its own physical resistance can and must ultimately translate into the narrative of it, or better the former and the latter coexist and cannot be separated. The city defends its own space at the Mediterranean intersection of land and sea, asking its people not to close “la sua finestra sul mare con altri grattacieli,”<sup>124</sup> (Moghrabi 92) while the people’s resurgent narrative of it gives testimony, and itself participates in this very movement of resistance.

Then, as the last of the chapters centered on the city suggests, Tripoli is “una città fittizia,” (Moghrabi 139) literally a “fake city,” where the etymology of the word, from Latin “*fingere*,” alludes to the dimension of the imagination, of the narrative itself. Tripoli is a city “per racconti [...] una città vera e una dalle pareti illusorie [...] Chi vi abita vive nella realtà, ma si costruisce storie.”<sup>125</sup> (Moghrabi 139) Like the Mediterranean to which it belongs, then, the city is both a real and an imaginary space, whose resistance, too, can only happen on both levels at the same time, on the physical level of its local space and on the narrative level of the novel that gives it voice.

### Narrative Movement

The constant fight for physical and narrative movement that the women in Moghrabi’s novel never give up is as necessary, and vital, as it is risky. The danger of failure, with the consequent threat of falling back into a dreadful condition of immobility, never fades, as Yosra expresses through the insightful simile of the butterfly: “Provavo la stessa sensazione volta dopo volta. Spesso mi sentivo leggera come una farfallina. Quella farfalla, però, aveva un’anima che la appesantiva sempre di più, mentre girava intorno a una lampada. Girava e girava, fino a

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<sup>124</sup> “her window on the sea with more skyscrapers”

<sup>125</sup> “suitable for stories [...] a real city and a city with illusory walls [...] The person who inhabits it lives in reality, but creates stories for herself.”

toccarla, bruciarsi e cadere immobile.”<sup>126</sup> (Moghrabi 186) As in the case of Shauba/Icarus, here as well the ultimate, and only, space available to the women of the wind’s agency is the in-between space of their own lives. They can only find “potential for subversion and contestation in the interstices of established orders,” (Kandiyoti 141) in the suspended space of their endless journey, regardless of their final destination. As for both the archetypal figure of Ulysses and for Prosa’s Shauba, the movement of resistance here again materializes in the dimension of the “flight,” which can only happen in physical and narrative terms at the same time.<sup>127</sup> As Assia Djébar points out in relation to her personal experience as a young woman in French-colonized Algeria, it is only through its narrative emancipation that the female body can keep striving towards its liberation: “When I write and read... my body travels far in subversive space, in spite of the neighbors and suspicious matrons; it would not need much for it to take wing and fly away!”<sup>128</sup> (Djébar 184) Significantly, in Mernissi’s account of her own childhood in French-colonized Morocco, the aunt Habiba holds a special place as the “official story-teller” of the whole harem. The young Fatima recalls that one of the most popular stories her aunt kept narrating in the space of the harem was “about the ‘Woman with the Wings,’ who could fly away from the courtyard whenever she wanted to;” (Mernissi 22) wings made out not of wax, as in Icarus’ case, but of words.

Women of the winds and of the wings, the women of the novel thus share the narrative art of storytelling, which was embedded in Arab culture since its origins,<sup>129</sup> and had a significant role in challenging the supposed subaltern position of women in the Islamic world

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<sup>126</sup> “I had the same feeling time after time. Often I felt as light as a little butterfly. That butterfly, however, had a soul that was weighing her down more and more, while she was spinning around a lamp. She span and span, until she touched it, burned herself, and fell still.”

<sup>127</sup> For an interpretation of “flying” as an inherently woman’s gesture see Cixous 1976.

<sup>128</sup> For the significance of the narrative emancipation of women in Djébar’s work see Jane Hiddleston 2015.

<sup>129</sup> See Kilito 2014.

under colonial rule.<sup>130</sup> As Marnia Lazreg notes, in relation to the Algerian situation specifically, “the oral tradition established by women through the manipulation of speech is exceptionally rich. Throughout the colonial era and before the advent of television, storytelling was the quasi-monopoly of women.” (Lazreg 108) In accordance with the archetypal structure of *A Thousand and One Nights*, in Moghrabi’s novel the women variously reenact Scheherazade’s inexhaustible narrative effort. It is not only the narrative trajectory of Bahija’s migratory journey that extends, with regular and well-paced pauses, throughout the entire novel. Rather, the other women also constantly interrupt their own stories in the middle of telling them, deferring their continuation and conclusion in spite of the listener’s impatience. At the very dramatic climax of her story, Umm Farah refuses to continue, despite the fact that Bahija insists “perché proseguisse la storia, [...] perché era impaziente di saperne di più.”<sup>131</sup> (Moghrabi 30) While telling her story to the Writer, on a day when it was clear that “aveva voglia di raccontare più di qualsiasi altra volta,”<sup>132</sup> (Moghrabi 95) Huda nevertheless interrupts her flow in order to persuade the Writer to move from the apartment to a café. Only once there, she finally resumes her tale. Yosra as well, whom the Writer at first considers a silly woman, only “brava a raccontare barzellette e far ridere,”<sup>133</sup> (Moghrabi 117) manages, in the short narrative space of a few chapters, to capture the Writer’s full attention, “come Shaharazad, smettendo di parlare proprio sul più bello.”<sup>134</sup> (Moghrabi 183) The Writer herself becomes so dependent on Yosra’s story that, every time Yosra stops, she feels “un totale senso di smarrimento [...] come chi guarda un programma in TV in cui una scritta annuncia la fine della puntata proprio sul più

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<sup>130</sup> Fatima Mernissi and Assia Djebar are only two among many Muslim women autobiographical writers who celebrate the value of female oral narrative as a shaping force in their life. See Golley 2007.

<sup>131</sup> “that she continue with the story, [...] as she was impatient to know more about it.”

<sup>132</sup> “she wanted to tell stories more than any other time”

<sup>133</sup> “good at telling jokes and at making people laugh”

<sup>134</sup> “as Scheherazade, interrupting her speech right at the best part.”

bello.”<sup>135</sup> (Moghrabi 133) Contrary to the situation in *A Thousand and One Nights*, there is no king to please here, as Moghrabi’s “Scheherazades” are not required to face the physical threat of a powerful man in order to save their own lives. However, each of the women takes part in a shared effort of keeping each other’s narrative moving, as silence, another face of Scheherazade’s mortal danger, is the real threat they all need to face.

Such a communal dimension of storytelling has a significant effect on the polyphonic structure of the story the novel as a whole narrates. It is as if the women are orchestrating together the whole narrative, as they all contribute to its movement, which develops through a deployment of strategic pauses and deferrals.<sup>136</sup> However, it is not only through the oral dimension of storytelling that the women take their part in the narrative. It is also, and more specifically, through the act of writing that the narrative itself can become a means for the women’s resistance. Thus, as in Prosa’s play, a Mediterranean narrative agency moves back and forth from the author/writer to the character(s), who is also the narrator of her own story, where the written text itself is the ultimate materialization of a narrative resistance in the Mediterranean.

Obviously, writing as a professional activity is essential for the first-person internal narrator of the novel, who significantly gets her “proper” name, in the space of the narrative, from her own professional qualification as a writer. However, the Writer is not the only one in the novel to perform the act of writing. Both Yosra and Huda are particularly interested in developing their own writing skills for divergent, but also complementary reasons. First of all, writing acts as an “intermediary” in the relation between Huda and the Writer. Huda gets to

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<sup>135</sup> “a complete sense of loss [...] as it happens to someone who is watching a program on TV where a sign announces the end of the episode right at the most interesting moment.”

<sup>136</sup> This dimension of strategy, and ultimately of the woman’s agency, goes sometimes lost in the Western reception of the figure of Scheherazade, as Mernissi notes: “I was amazed to realize that for many Westerners, Scheherazade was considered a lovely but simple-minded entertainer, someone who narrates innocuous tales and dress fabulously. In our part of the world, Scheherazade is perceived as a courageous heroine and is one of the rare female mythical figures. Scheherazade is a strategist and a powerful thinker...” (Mernissi 15)



know about the Writer through the Writer's own writing, as she reads some of the Writer's articles in the newspaper. Moreover, Huda shares the Writer's passion for writing, as she herself "sognava ancora di diventare una scrittrice, con una colonna tutta sua sull'ultima pagina di un importante giornale estero. Diceva di essere brava ad analizzare eventi come guerre e grandi crisi politiche."<sup>137</sup> (Moghrabi 93) If Huda likes to write about events from the outside world, Yosra's writing is instead all focused on her own interior world. As I have already mentioned, brief and scattered excerpts of her own written works find their space within the written space of the novel, contributing, as we have seen, to the multiplicity of perspectives through which the novel itself develops. As the Writer notes, "le piaceva mettere su carta soprattutto dei suoi pensieri. Scriveva solo in bagno, perché solo lì il marito e quei diavoli dei suoi figli non potevano seguirla."<sup>138</sup> (Moghrabi 61) Writing is for Yosra a self-empowering experience, by which she can also reclaim an individual space of agency within the social constraints of her own family. Furthermore, through the narrative space of the novel, Yosra's own attempt to put together all those scattered notes in a coherent piece emerges, although she also soon realizes that "scrivere è un compito difficile."<sup>139</sup> (Moghrabi 120) The difficulty of the task, however, does not erase its necessity, so that Yosra tries hard to persuade the Writer to write a novel about her, as she still wants to "vedere la sua unica e irripetibile storia d'amore su carta."<sup>140</sup> (Moghrabi 62) Thus, whereas Huda aims to write about what happens around her, Yosra only wants to focus on her own emotions and life events. In this way, they are somehow two faces of the same coin, of the Muslim woman's desire to emancipate herself, both by taking part in the public sphere and by gaining freedom of expressing her own wills and desires. In this respect,

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<sup>137</sup> "was still dreaming of becoming a writer, with her own column on the last page of an important foreign newspaper. She said she was good at analyzing events such as wars and big political crises."

<sup>138</sup> "she especially liked to put on paper some of her thoughts. She wrote only in the bathroom, as only there her husband and her sons – those devils – could not follow her."

<sup>139</sup> "writing is a hard task."

<sup>140</sup> "see her unique and unrepeatable love story on paper."

storytelling is not enough: the stories need to be written and to move, circulate, and resonate widely in the outside space. It is as if all the women's efforts ultimately converge towards their own, shared and individual, realization as writers, where the very narrative development of the novel follows the women's struggles for the accomplishment of their own writing desires.

“Non pensavo che la scrittura potesse far ottenere tanto rispetto a qualcuno, in particolare a una donna,”<sup>141</sup> (Moghrabi 119) Yosra notes, thinking about the Writer's (supposed) literary reputation. What mostly distinguishes the Writer from the other women characters in the novel is precisely this sort of aura, which, in the eyes of the others, surrounds her professional figure. However, the Writer is in fact a complex, quasi-enigmatic character, as she struggles throughout the novel as much as the other women, and on different levels. Her literary recognition is, contrary to the other women's beliefs, far from being truly achieved, while she keeps striving to get real visibility in the field. It is important to note that, as shown quite clearly in some passages of the novel, the marginality of the character/narrator's condition as a writer is inscribed within the broader marginality of Libya in the larger context of the Arab cultural and literary world. As the Writer herself notes, among the well-known Arab writers she happens to meet at various conferences she attends, “quasi nessuno voleva conoscere la città di Tripoli né si preoccupava di chiedere qualcosa della sua cultura e dei suoi letterati.”<sup>142</sup> (Moghrabi 122) Thus, behind the Writer's own fight against the “neglect of Libyan literature in the Arab world and the ignorance of the West,”<sup>143</sup> we can see Moghrabi's own effort to make her voice heard in the international literary market in which, with the exception of the renowned author Ibrahim-al-Koni, Libyan writers are poorly represented. Thus, resistance within the novel occurs not only in a variety of forms but also on several levels, moving from the level of

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<sup>141</sup> “I never thought writing could make someone – and a woman in particular – achieve so much respect.”

<sup>142</sup> “almost no one wanted to get to know Tripoli, or bothered to ask something about its culture and its literary men.”

<sup>143</sup> See Samuel Shimon's editorial in *Libyan Fiction*, Banipal, 2011.

the characters' stories and their own narratives to the level of the author. In the latter case, marginality itself acts as a site of possibilities, a further form of resistance. For the character of the Writer, as well as for the real writer behind her, to speak from the margins "offers the possibilities of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds." (bell hooks 341)

Moreover, the Writer struggles to reconcile, within the space of the novel, the personal and the professional dimensions of her own life; the latter seems to overshadow the former, or, rather, to prevent her from becoming aware of the influence of one over the other. Although she speaks in the first person through many chapters of the novel, she does not narratively reveal herself, while she seems to be obsessed with the need to listen to other people's stories, with a precise task in mind: she wants to ultimately give all these stories a proper narrative frame in a written form. As she presents all the women characters of the novel (which is at the same time Moghrabi's novel and the novel the Writer herself is trying to write), she reveals her plan: "Scriverò su di loro [...] Nella mia storia tutte appariranno secondo la loro importanza, non come ognuna vede se stessa."<sup>144</sup> (Moghrabi 50) The Writer claims her own right to narrate the women, and their stories, through a lens she will herself impose on them, regardless of their individual perspectives on their own stories. Since the meetings of the women of the wind appear to her as the ideal context for the development of the novel she has long dreamed of writing, she aims to act as the outside framer, the director of her own narrative: "Mentre osservavo cosa succedeva lì intorno a me, mi allontanai ponendomi al di sopra di loro; mi sembrava di guardare la scena di un film bisognoso di un regista dotato e professionale."<sup>145</sup> (Moghrabi 55) In other words, the Writer aims to be an external observer of those same

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<sup>144</sup> "I will write about them. In my story, they will all appear according to their importance, and not to how they see themselves."

<sup>145</sup> "While I was observing what was happening there around me, I pulled away putting myself above them; it seemed to me that I was looking at a scene from a movie that needed a talented and professional director."

meetings in which, nevertheless, she takes part, thus reclaiming detachment from the stories she intends to write.

However, her attempt to remain “fuori dal coro”<sup>146</sup> (Moghrabi 71) is destined to fail, where the very word “chorus” already suggests the coming together of different narrative voices that, however, can be harmonized only to a certain extent. In the end, the Writer gets inevitably far more involved than she would like to, as she cannot protect herself from getting “preoccupazione, ansia e inquietudine”<sup>147</sup> (Moghrabi 67) for Yosra, or to feel the conflict “tra l’amica in apparenza fedele e la folle scrittrice in cerca di una storia da scrivere.”<sup>148</sup> (Moghrabi 66) At the same time, the more she moves from her supposed, and never achieved, status of external observer to the acknowledgment of her own belonging to the women of the wind, the more the possibility to give the novel a proper frame dissolves. The stories seem to choose her, rather than the other way around, as she progressively loses control over their various, and interconnected, trajectories, and her own story emerges and develops precisely through its intersection with all the others.<sup>149</sup> If the women of the wind’s stories, then, ultimately refuse to be framed in a coherent and unitary whole, the unity of the whole novel, as the unity of the Mediterranean the narrative itself addresses, can only come out of the unframed crossing of multiple threads. The stories keep moving according to the movement of the winds that blow across the Mediterranean, in the very space in which the women of the wind both live and narrate their own stories.

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<sup>146</sup> “an outsider”

<sup>147</sup> “concern, anxiety and disquiet”

<sup>148</sup> “between the apparently loyal friend and the crazy writer looking for a story to write.”

<sup>149</sup> It is noteworthy that only at the end of the narrated time of the story (and at the beginning of the narrative time of the novel), when the Writer eventually gives up her own effort to frame the other women’s stories, she gives birth to the daughter she had long desired to have, so that her own story can begin. Significantly, the baby is born exactly nine months after Bahija’s departure, at the time in which the Writer receives the recorded tape. Thus, the Writer’s own personal story is deeply interconnected with all the other women’s stories that she attempts in vain to frame.

### Bahija's Narrative of Migration

One of the multiple women of the wind's stories is the story of a physical and narrative Mediterranean crossing. Bahija's own narrative of her migratory journey from Libya to Lampedusa significantly resonates with Shauba's dramatic monologue in Prosa's play. Although Bahija, contrary to Shauba, does in the end reach the Italian island, her narrative still develops simultaneously to her own physical movement across the sea, as she records the event at the time of its happening. The Writer is supposed to give Bahija's story too a proper frame, as she reassures the Moroccan woman on the eve of her departure: "Non importa cosa dirai o come parlerai, metterò io le parole in ordine."<sup>150</sup> (Moghrabi 15) However, Bahija's story, like all the other stories of the women of the wind, refuses any superimposed order. The Writer never manages to rearrange Bahija's own recorded narrative, which is the only narrative of migration Moghrabi's novel ultimately gives space and voice to. In the attempt to write her own never-realized novel, the Writer seems to get trapped in a narrative impasse, as she cannot reconcile Bahija's narrative of migration with all the "altri mondi e altre storie senza nessun legame con il mondo dell'emigrazione"<sup>151</sup> (Moghrabi 52) that she is surrounded by and feels the need to write about. However, the impasse is only apparent, as the stories ultimately find their own arrangement within the overall narrative of Moghrabi's novel, where one does not obscure, but rather illuminates the other. The stories of all the other women of the wind play a key role in the whole novel in relation to one another and to Bahija's story as well. They recover and bring to the forefront an entire world – and specifically a women's dimension – that is often concealed, and forgotten, within the phenomenon of migration itself. Thus, Bahija's own narrative voice can ultimately only emerge through its constant interaction with the other women's voices, within the unitary space of a novel that realizes itself through multiplicity and plurivocality.

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<sup>150</sup> "It does not matter what you will say and how you will talk, I will put things in order."

<sup>151</sup> "other worlds and other stories with no links with the world of migration"

It is necessary to note that there is, among the different women of the wind, a significant power imbalance, which the novel does not attempt to hide. The social condition of the women who live in the building – Yosra, Huda, and the Writer – and of the women who work in the various apartments of the building itself – Bahija and Umm Farah – is clearly very different, while it also determines their reciprocal interaction. If Umm Farah only narrates her story to Bahija, as they share similar life trajectories and have the chance to get to know each other while working together in the Writer’s apartment, the “narrative” relation between the Writer and Bahija is more complex. It is Bahija who voluntarily chooses to reveal to the Writer, and to the Writer only, her migratory plan. Then, the Writer seems to feel the right to exercise pressure on Bahija by demanding Bahija’s own narrative of the event, and dictating the terms of it. Far from simply resigning to the Writer’s requests, however, Bahija “non si sentiva obbligata a mantenere la sua promessa. Giunta sulle coste italiane, sarebbe sparita del tutto. Nemmeno nel caso peggiore, se la barca fosse affondata [...] la Scrittrice sarebbe arrivata a lei.”<sup>152</sup> (Moghrabi 45) If she ultimately does record her own story, and spontaneously decides to send it back to the Writer, it is not because of the Writer’s persistent demands, but only out of her own needs and will. Since Bahija’s whole narrative journey ultimately refuses to abide by the Writer’s narrative rules, her story only appears within the novel in its originally unframed form. Bahija’s subaltern position, then, does not translate into her powerlessness. On the contrary, she does not fail to reclaim and exercise, within the narrative space of the novel, her own narrative agency.

Moreover, Bahija proves to be neither naïve nor passively subject to the various women she works for; rather, she develops her own strategies in order not only to establish advantageous relationships with them, but also to subvert the power dynamic itself. In both cases, she herself exercises power by virtue of her own subtle narrative manipulation,

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<sup>152</sup> “did not feel obliged to keep her promise. Once on the Italian shores, she would have completely disappeared. Not even in the worst-case scenario, if the boat had sunk [...] The Writer would have got to her.”

responding to what Mernissi recalls as her mother's most recurrent warning: "your chance of happiness depends on how skillful you become with words." (Mernissi 16) If Bahija's own words have "molta influenza"<sup>153</sup> (Moghrabi 85) on the women she works for, she is also "capace di sciogliere la lingua di ogni donna,"<sup>154</sup> (Moghrabi 19) using the other women's words to her own advantage: "aveva capito che la conoscenza di un segreto poteva invertire i ruoli, trasformando lei in signora."<sup>155</sup> (Moghrabi 85) Thus, in a sort of "carnavalesque" reversal, Bahija manages to "narratively" turn the world in which she lives upside down, taking over the powerful role of "signora," which her own social status has not provided her access to. It is of course, in Bakhtin's terms, only a temporary and ambivalent overturning.<sup>156</sup> However, it does have a potentially emancipatory connotation, insofar as the experience of the carnival, although provisional, still points to the possible overthrowing of further constraints, which seem to determine, and undermine, the women's relationships. "Con le donne del palazzo era molto più facile infrangere quell'illusoria barriera,"<sup>157</sup> (Moghrabi 109) Bahija notes. The women of the wind ultimately share the same negotiating camp, as they all live and narrate themselves in the space of their interconnected journeys. As Yosra acknowledges, they are all "sulla stessa barca," (Moghrabi 64) literally in the same boat, whose heterotopic space allows them all to exercise agency and resistance.

In the specific case of Bahija's migratory journey, the space of the boat allows her to acquire a further dimension, as she too becomes a storyteller, a role that she did not share with the other women within the building. At the time of descending into the "oscuro ventre della barca,"<sup>158</sup> (Moghrabi 157) narration is the only self-reassuring gesture that can be performed.

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<sup>153</sup> "a lot of influence"

<sup>154</sup> "able to loosen every woman's tongue"

<sup>155</sup> "she realized that the knowledge of a secret could reverse the roles, turning her into the lady of the house."

<sup>156</sup> See Bakhtin 1968.

<sup>157</sup> "With the women of the building it was much easier to break that illusory barrier"

<sup>158</sup> "dark womb of the boat"

As in the open boat of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, where "the experience of the abyss" is "the best element of the exchange," (Glissant 8) narrative (poetry, in Glissant's terms) can only make one feel "as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify." (Glissant 9) Like Shauba's experience, Bahija's migratory journey is inseparable from its narrative dimension, which articulates itself in the polyphony of the voices she records on her tape. Moreover, it is ultimately the narrative itself that, in Shauba's as in Bahija's Mediterranean, extends the present time of the journey both back to the past and forward towards its future dimension yet to be realized.

Bahija's narrative resonates with Shauba's own monologue not only because, as I already said, they both develop simultaneously to the physical journey they narrate, but also since they both necessarily result from the interaction, and coming together, of different narrative voices. In the space of Shauba's monologue, these voices alternated with the protagonist's sovereign voice, contributing to the movement and polyphony of her performative narrative. In Moghrabi's novel, the tape with the recording of Bahija's physical and narrative journey must necessarily register unselectively her voice and, at the same time, the various voices of the people she interacts with in the space of the boat. What will emerge from the tape, then, which not surprisingly the Writer won't be able to coherently frame, is the juxtaposition of multiple narrative voices, which all significantly speak through different languages and dialects, testifying to the heterogeneous dimension of migration itself. Rida, the former doorman of the building Bahija used to work in, talks with her throughout the whole journey in his own Egyptian dialect, while a man, whom Bahija identifies from his dialect as Tunisian, "parlava usando qua e là parole francesi."<sup>159</sup> (Moghrabi 38) Bahija also listens to the dialogue between

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<sup>159</sup> "was using French words here and there."



an Iraqi and an Algerian man, who clearly “si esprimevano in dialetti molto diversi.”<sup>160</sup> (Moghrabi 161) In the physical space of the boat “strani dialetti e parlate si sovrapponevano,”<sup>161</sup> (Moghrabi 16) so that the narrative space of the recorded tape must inevitably give testimony to, and restore, this simultaneous concurrence of different narrative voices in all their linguistic diversity. Within the performative space of the women’s apartments, the different stories created the narrative movement of the Writer’s first-person narrative. Here, in the space of the boat, “come sul palcoscenico di un teatro,”<sup>162</sup> (Moghrabi 159) Bahija’s recorded narrative is created and sustained by the movement of multiple and multi-lingual narrative voices, which struggle, both within and beyond the space of the boat, not to be reduced to a single one.

Moreover, and again similarly to Prosa’s play, Bahija’s polyphonic narrative also recovers and reactivates within the present space of the journey the dimension of the past, while pointing towards the future. As in Shauba’s monologue, Bahija’s narrative journey does not erase the tragic dimension and the harsh aspects of the journey itself. Bahija’s boat is also overcrowded, so that she needs to fight exhaustion while standing, as there is no enough space to seat. At the same time, fishes and human bodies within the shared space of the sea get more and more confounded with each other, as the smell of spoiled fish mixes with that of the humans’ bodily fluids. If Shauba’s monologue alludes to the process of transformation, on the verge of sinking, of the woman’s own body into a fish, Bahija too is well aware of the subtle line that separates one from the other, as “chi finisce alla deriva diventa cibo per pesci.”<sup>163</sup> (Moghrabi 52) Then, the allusion to the fertility of the Mediterranean sea around the Libyan city of Zuwara, the departing point of Bahija’s migratory boat, which is supposed to provide “la

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<sup>160</sup> “were speaking in very different dialects.”

<sup>161</sup> “strange dialects and languages were overlapping”

<sup>162</sup> “as on a stage”

<sup>163</sup> “the one who gets adrift, becomes food for fishes.”

migliore qualità di pesce,”<sup>164</sup> (Moghrabi 17) cannot help but sounding somehow sinister. The Mediterranean Sea can be as fertile with fish as it is with human corpses.

The frightful conditions of the physical journey inevitably carry with themselves the threat of both a physical and a mental immobility, apparently annihilating, as in Shauba’s case, the possibility of movement beyond the present itself. Thus, Bahija seems to be temporarily stuck in her own present time, able to register “soltanto ciò che avveniva intorno a lei, come se fosse nata proprio in quel momento, senza passato né storia, senza patria né amici e senza nessuna esperienza.”<sup>165</sup> (Moghrabi 39) If, at the moment of boarding the boat, she feels “alle porte di una nuova vita, come una bambina partorita dalla terra,”<sup>166</sup> (Moghrabi 40) this apparent condition of rebirth already contains in itself the threat of going back to the same earth at the end of one’s own life,<sup>167</sup> as the space of the boat configures itself, in Umm Farah’s words, as “nave della morte.”<sup>168</sup> (Moghrabi 43) However, here, as in Prosa’s play, it is the space in-between, the space of the sea journey that needs to be valued, and to regain its multilayered dimension by virtue of its own narration. Only if the Mediterranean “boat of death” becomes also the space of a Mediterranean narrative agency, able to recover the movement of different voices and times within it, it can finally convert into a “casa della speranza,”<sup>169</sup> (Moghrabi 43) a space for hope and resistance.<sup>170</sup>

However, the dimension of the past that the narrative space of the journey can, and must, recover, seems at first to worsen the migrants’ current condition with its heavy presence.

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<sup>164</sup> “the best quality of fish”

<sup>165</sup> “only what was happening around her, as if she were born just at that time, with neither past nor history, with neither homeland nor friends and without any experience.”

<sup>166</sup> “at the beginning of a new life, as a child just born of Earth”

<sup>167</sup> I am alluding to *Genesis* 3:19-20: “For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return.”

<sup>168</sup> “boat of death.”

<sup>169</sup> “house of hope”

<sup>170</sup> While Umm Farah calls the migrants’ boat “nave della morte,” “casa della speranza” refers specifically to the place in which Bahija leaves the little Sara (Hosna’s daughter), since she does not want her to face the risks that the migratory journey implies. However, the two expressions appear on the very same page of the novel, as Bahija’s own memory moves from Umm Farah to Sara, so that it is her own narrative journey that creates an explicit, and significant, link between the two spaces.

Rida “non osava pensare ad altro che ad ascoltare una storia”<sup>171</sup> not only “per dimenticare la paura del viaggio,”<sup>172</sup> (Moghrabi 78) but also “per dimenticare il passato tutto in una volta [...] liberarsi dei ricordi.”<sup>173</sup> (Moghrabi 79) The past appears to be a burden for Bahija too, but her own efforts to free herself from it seem vain, while the reemerging of memories actually affects the current passing of time: “Prima di salpare, era certa che il tempo sarebbe passato presto se solo fosse riuscita a liberarsi in un sol colpo di quegli odiosi ricordi e di tutto il suo passato.”<sup>174</sup> (Moghrabi 83) Not only, in other words, is Bahija ultimately incapable of getting rid of her past, but the past also slows down the present. Thus, the apparent burden of the past becomes a potentiality for the very present time of a narrative resistance, which can only emerge, as in Shauba’s case, when “everything slows down,” (Prosa 17) as an antidote to “fast modernity.” Since Bahija’s own memory, already charged with the memories of her first migration and of all the experiences in-between the two, “non tollerava più niente,”<sup>175</sup> (Moghrabi 13) the metallic memory becomes, in her own words, “l’ultimo legame con il passato.”<sup>176</sup> (Moghrabi 112) But the metallic memory is also the ultimate, and only, witness to the present time of her Mediterranean migratory journey. Thus, when, once settled in France, Bahija decides to send the tape back, she makes the deliberate choice to keep this link alive, finally reconciling her past and her present, while working towards the realization of her own future.

Within the space of the boat, where the narrative itself gets recorded in the present and for the future, this future can only be dreamed of. It is the dream of all the migrants, who “sognavano un mondo nuovo, un’altra patria con terre e rive in cui tenersi stretti.”<sup>177</sup> (Moghrabi

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<sup>171</sup> “could not dare to think about anything but listening to a story”

<sup>172</sup> “to forget the fear of the journey”

<sup>173</sup> “to forget the past all at once [...] get rid of the memories.”

<sup>174</sup> “before sailing, she was sure that time would go by fast, if only she could get rid at once of all those hateful memories and her whole past.”

<sup>175</sup> “could not bear anything anymore”

<sup>176</sup> “the last link to the past.”

<sup>177</sup> “were dreaming of a new world, another homeland with lands and shores to which hold on.”

12) It is Bahija's own dream of "arrivare sulle coste italiane e spazzare via ogni cosa,"<sup>178</sup> (Moghrabi 112) and it is also Umm Farah's dream of "lasciare l'infelicità su quelle rive [libiche]"<sup>179</sup> (Moghrabi 23) of the Mediterranean on which she landed after her first migratory journey. Quite significantly, in all of these cases the dream lies, or rather emerges from the same shores of the Mediterranean across which the migrants constantly move, hence in the very space where the land and the sea meet. Bahija's own physical and narrative journey, then, ultimately re-proposes Shauba's perspective on a renewed Mediterranean, whose shores would not be enclosing and militarized borders, but rather sites of encounter and resistance.

The Libyan and the Italian shores Bahija travels across do not seem to be, in the end, very different from each other. The heterotopic space of Lampedusa beach, which Shauba could only imagine and where Mahama went looking for her in vain, resembles very closely the beach in Tripoli, where Umm Farah tells Bahija about her failed attempt to migrate. In both cases, the crowd of tourists enjoys the natural beauty and the freedom of the space, unaware of, or rather oblivious to, the destiny of millions of migrants that strive to reach those same shores. As the shores are both "zones of transit" and "transitory spaces," (Chambers 5) so are the countries to which they belong. Libya is, for Bahija as for many of her travel companions, "un luogo di passaggio"<sup>180</sup> in which they all can only feel suspended "tra la vita e la morte,"<sup>181</sup> (Moghrabi 40) having left their own life behind them, and ready to face death as the only way to imagine a renewed life. Italy is too, both for Bahija and for many other migrants, "solo una terra di passaggio da attraversare,"<sup>182</sup> (Moghrabi 135) an obstacle, but also potentially the first encouraging step on the path towards the migrant's own self-determination. Then, land and sea

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<sup>178</sup> "getting to the Italian shores and wipe out everything"

<sup>179</sup> "leaving unhappiness on those [Libyan] shores"

<sup>180</sup> "a transitory place"

<sup>181</sup> "between life and death"

<sup>182</sup> "only a transitory land to cross"

within the Mediterranean space are both ultimate sites of passage, which coexist and share their moving and endlessly changing boundaries.<sup>183</sup>

Within the narrative space of the novel, the migrants' future still remains uncertain. Even when, as in the case of the Mediterranean crossing the novel itself narrates, the migrants' boat does not get tragically shipwrecked, the migrants are nevertheless ready to face a different kind of death, "una morte" – as the Iraqi man on Bahija's boat prefigures it – "che forse potremo vedere con questi occhi. Una morte seguita dalla vita non nell'aldilà, ma in questo mondo."<sup>184</sup> (Moghrabi 162) Lampedusa is both the physical space of a detention center in which the migrants are obliged to spend their first night, and the imaginary space for "l'inizio del sogno."<sup>185</sup> (Moghrabi 207) Thus, as a fire breaks out and the migrants walk out of the high walls of the camp, they are at least free to keep walking "verso un futuro ignoto."<sup>186</sup> (Moghrabi 214)

A parallel uncertainty ultimately characterizes, not by chance, the condition of the women back in Tripoli, as the "piano di abbattimento e demolizione per lo sviluppo"<sup>187</sup> (Moghrabi 199) of the city obliges them to move out of their building, so as to get also dispersed one from the other. Thus, as Bahija's boat reaches Lampedusa beach – and then the walls of the camp collapse following the fire – the walls of the women of the wind's building in Tripoli get demolished, and the entire frame of the novel fades at the same time. With the vanishing of the constraints, it is the physical and the narrative space of the Mediterranean that potentially expands. As the narrative cannot be constrained within the novel, so the space of the Mediterranean crossings this very narrative creates cannot be contained. Thus, the women of

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<sup>183</sup> In the third chapter, I focus on the desert as a specific kind of land, in which this endless condition of passage assumes a fundamental dimension.

<sup>184</sup> "a death that we will perhaps be able to see with these eyes. A death followed by life not in the afterlife, but in this world."

<sup>185</sup> "the beginning of the dream."

<sup>186</sup> "towards an unknown future."

<sup>187</sup> "abatement project for demolition and development"

the wind's ultimately uncertain condition is the very potentiality their own Mediterranean narratives keep creating, as it allows them to move in a renewed and shared Mediterranean world.

The two works I put in dialogue with each other in this chapter manage to recover the complexity that lies behind the contemporary movement of people across the Mediterranean sea- and land-scape. Whereas mainstream media narrative tends, in the way and for the reasons that I explained at the beginning of the chapter, to gloss over the multilayered dimension of migration, and to convey a simplified picture of it, Prosa's and Moghrabi's narratives respond to Chambers' call for "dissonant narratives," as they are capable of creating disturbing and provocative sounds.

It is not by chance that the auditory dimension is crucial to both works, where the real experience of migration is all contained within the voice that tells it at the very time of its happening. In Prosa's work, Shauba's sovereign voice sustains the dramatic, and narrative, development of the whole play. Bahija's recorded voice, in Moghrabi's novel, is the only tangible trace of her Mediterranean passage, and what ultimately gives meaning to the Writer's own narrative effort. At the same time, the narrative voices of the two female protagonists do not aim to present a unitary narrative of the Mediterranean passage itself, as they can only make themselves heard through their ultimate fragmentation into multiple voices. Thus, the polyphony that characterizes both works is the only narrative texture suitable to give voice to the stratified space of the whole Mediterranean, whose unity does not exist in itself, but can only come out of diffraction and dispersion.

## Chapter Two

### Narrative of Land and Sea

#### I. The Island Narrative of Paolo Rumiz's *Il Ciclope*

*Questo non è mare infcondo  
anzitutto perché ricco di isole.  
[This is not an infertile sea,  
because, first of all, it is rich in islands.]*  
Massimo Cacciari, *Arcipelago*

As shown in the previous chapter, Lina Prosa's *Lampedusa Beach* and Moghrabi's novel *Women of the Wind* powerfully narrate the urgent issue of migration, while also conveying the complexity of its multilayered meaning. The contemporary scenario of migratory flows across the Mediterranean Sea –, which the play and the novel address – is an evident reaffirmation of the centrality of movement for the characterization and the very definition of the Mediterranean, as Fernand Braudel already noted.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, as pointed out in the introduction to this work, the Mediterranean has long been accused of being backward and immobile, adverse as such to the linear progress of a presumed European modernity.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, Prosa's and Moghrabi's texts also affirm how movement in the Mediterranean is not only the physical movement of people across the sea, from and towards its different shores, but it is also the metaphorical movement of a Mediterranean narrative of migration; narrative that does not reject

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<sup>1</sup> Movement seems to be the most relevant characteristic of the Mediterranean of the historians. According to Braudel, "the whole Mediterranean consists of movement in space." (Braudel 276). Also, movement and fragmentation within a certain unity seem to be the specific features of the Mediterranean region according to Horden and Purcell (Horden and Purcell 2000). Movement and cross-cultural interactions also characterize Abulafia's *Mediterraneans* (Abulafia 2011).

<sup>2</sup> For a deconstruction of the European-Atlantic perspective on the Mediterranean, which conceives it as backward and exotic, see Cassano. *Il Pensiero Meridiano* [*Southern Thought*, 2012]. See also Chambers. *Minority Mediterraneans* [ms]. For an understanding of Southern Europe, and the Mediterranean, as an "internal other" to Europe itself, conceived as such by modern political science as a consequence of a new longitudinal north-south divide, see Dainotto 2006.

modernity per se, but rather complicates its meaning, while resisting and putting into question Eurocentric assumptions about the Mediterranean itself.<sup>3</sup>

Paolo Rumiz's *Il Ciclope* [*The Cyclops*], travel reportage of the time spent on a Mediterranean island, further challenges any binary opposition between movement and immobility, as well as between modernity and tradition, in the Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> The work builds instead a narrative of the possible reconciliation, or better re-configuration of such categories in the space of a Mediterranean that subverts normative conceptions of center-periphery relations, and where land and sea, human and non-human can also finally coexist. While voluntarily trapped in the lighthouse of a tiny island in the middle of the sea, in a particular interaction of time and space, the writer undertakes a narrative journey that allows him to participate in the instability, constant changes, and adaptations of the Mediterranean as a whole. Thus, Rumiz's Mediterranean reveals itself as a space that embraces its own contradictions, while powerfully struggling to resist the annihilation, oblivion, and lack of meaning in which a fast globalization tends to relegate it – where globalization is intended as destruction of traditions that are not pre-modern and pre-capitalist, but “successful accommodations of the old institutions to modern technology.” (Jameson 63)

#### A Physical and Narrative Journey

Journalist for the Trieste newspaper *Il Piccolo* and for *La Repubblica*, well known in Italy for his travel reportages across the country and the whole of Europe, in his most recent book *Il Ciclope*, from 2015, Paolo Rumiz reports on his short stay on a tiny island at the center of the Mediterranean. The author admittedly refuses to reveal his destination as a way to preserve the island from becoming a mass tourist attraction. At the same time, he intends to temporarily

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<sup>3</sup> For the idea of a “counter-figuration” of the Mediterranean see Chambers 2008.

<sup>4</sup> For the Mediterranean as an alternative modernity see Chambers. *Sea and the City* [ms].



interrupt the daily rhythm of life in order to “ubriacarsi di vento e di mito,” (Rumiz 22) while diving into “le caverne inesplorate”<sup>5</sup> (Rumiz 15) of himself, as he puts it. In other words, the idea of the trip responds to the author’s own desire to re-actualize an ancestral relation with nature and mythological realms, in order to possibly recover an inner self that got lost in the routine of modern everyday life. A Mediterranean island seems to the writer the ideal location for such a purpose. His peculiar sort of static journey, then, qualifies itself as a deliberate escape from the rigid constraints of modernity; a modernity that the author seems to further identify with the rapidity of network interactions in the contemporary global world and with the vague space of northern Europe. The destination of this escape, then, seems to carry the promise of something different, which, however, needs somehow to be also defined. Is Rumiz trying to reject modernity, while embracing a return to tradition in the form of a “mondo di ieri” that has widely been replaced by “tempi nuovi [...] dall’era della plastica e dell’obsolescenza programmata?”<sup>6</sup> (Rumiz 14) If so, would this particular space, a surviving lighthouse in a wild and uninhabited island, perform its own diversity simply by allowing a temporary, fake and ephemeral, isolation from any kind of mediatic communication? Or rather, what kind of alternative could this Mediterranean island propose, if, by virtue of its own narration, it overcomes the very dichotomies the writer seems at first to reiterate?

By setting the conditions, motivations and expectations of his traveling experience in the above terms, Rumiz runs the risk of falling back into old and dangerous dichotomies, such as modernity vs tradition, and Europe vs Mediterranean. At the same time, his outspoken predilection for Greece, evident also in his numerous references to Greek language and mythology, may end up reinforcing a conventional Eurocentric equivalence, which links back

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<sup>5</sup> The book has not been translated into English, so the translations are mine: “get drunk on wind and myth”; “the unexplored caves.”

<sup>6</sup> “the world of yesterday”; “new times [...] by the era of plastic and of planned obsolescence.”

the whole Mediterranean to ancient Greece itself.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the space that the writer desires so ardently to inhabit, even if just for a few weeks, may appear as characterized by a double layer of alterity and exoticism. If the Mediterranean as a whole has long been dreamed of, both before and after colonialism and decolonization, as an exotic space from a European – and Eurocentric – point of view, islands too, as particular geographical and historical sites, have a long tradition of being depicted as isolated and, as such, fascinating and exotic.<sup>8</sup> Thus, at first glance, the Mediterranean to which Rumiz refers has an undeniable taste of Orient and seems to be identified with the Orient itself.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, its southern shore, with the combined Arab and north African influence, though not entirely absent from the author's points of references, gets nevertheless relegated to the background. In this conceptual framework, it might not be surprising to find scattered traces of a colonial attitude the author seems not even to be aware of. These traces emerge from the way in which he approaches the spectacle of nature upon his arrival on the island. It is the perspective that Sara Mills, in her study of the gendered nature of colonial space, defines as the "aesthetic of the sublime," where the immense "landscape is seen solely in terms of a backdrop in the working out of a self-identity and hence an imperial subject-position." (Mills 58) Moreover, given the island's condition of isolation and uninhabited-ness, Rumiz cannot fully avoid the temptation of assuming the attitude of the explorer. His act of giving a name to a donkey responds explicitly to such an attitude, where he asserts that "chi va alla scoperta di un'isola, come tutti i conquistatori, prende il vizio di

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<sup>7</sup> "Il debito greco: mi fa ridere, a ripensarci, che semplicemente se ne parli. Debito greco! Con quello che l'Europa e il mondo devono alla Grecia!" "The Greek debt: it makes me laugh, if I think about it, that people would even talk about it. Greek debt! With all that Europe and the world owe to Greece!" (Rumiz, 19) And later he expresses his appreciation for the name of a promontory in Southern Italy because its name tastes like ancient Greece. (Rumiz 51) The risk of suggesting a univocal Greek origin for the whole Mediterranean looms also over Cacciari's and Cassano's Italian geo-philosophy of the Mediterranean itself.

<sup>8</sup> This is evident when considering the wide range of traditional island literature, namely of literary works set on islands, starting from *Robinson Crusoe* onward.

<sup>9</sup> "Un vento che ha odore di Oriente." "A wind that smells of Orient." (Rumiz 16) "Da Levante continueremo ad attingere calore e vita." "From the East, we will keep drawing warmth and life." (Rumiz 23)

ribattezzare i luoghi e le creature che li abitano.”<sup>10</sup> (Rumiz 31) Naming is here an obvious act of assessing one’s own authority over something that has been discovered, and that, as such, can also be claimed as a legitimate conquest. In other words, the writer reactivates very old tropes of colonial writing, which run the risk of leading his narrative island towards a stereotypical and cliché representation.

How, then, does *Il Ciclope* manage to escape the traditional dichotomies and Eurocentric assumptions that seem at first to inform it? How is Rumiz’s narrative finally able to move a step forward into a rejection of these very constraints and a proposition of different categories and of a different characterization of the Mediterranean as a whole, even beyond and independently of its own author’s intention? The analysis of the work will show how the narrative dimension of the journey makes the physical, and paradoxically static, journey within the tiny Mediterranean island a movement capable of recovering the complexities of the whole Mediterranean space, within the larger complexity of the global world. Rumiz’s island narrative allows one to experience and reevaluate the contradictions that this Mediterranean space entails, ultimately promoting a new understanding of its potential role in the present as well as in the future.

In Prosa’s text, the time of writing coincided, in the author’s own words and in the self-development of the dramatic monologue, with the time of going down into the abyss of the sea. In *Il Ciclope* as well the journey and the narration of it happen at the same time, are experienced and performed as simultaneous, so that both texts are expressions of what Foucault has called “the epoch of simultaneity,” in which “anxiety has to do more with space than with time,” and where “space takes the form of the relation among sites.” (Foucault 22) *Il Ciclope* conveys very

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<sup>10</sup> The person who goes out to explore an island, like all the conquerors, takes the habit to rename the places and the creatures that inhabit them.”

accurately this density of a space created by a set of simultaneous relationships among different sites, a space that is at the same time a real, geographical, space, and a narrative one. As recent developments in narrative theory have shown, space is both an object of representation and a medium in which narrative is realized, and this double dimension is essential in Rumiz's work, as he travels within the space that his narrative also creates.<sup>11</sup>

Although the text narrates a journey that situates itself in the past, it also manages to communicate the immediacy of its happening. Throughout the whole text, verbs in the present tense restore the illusion of the simultaneity of the writing itself, of the concomitance of experience and narrative. In the author's own words, his Mediterranean journey relies on the almost perfect coincidence between the diary of the experience, namely the day to day registration of events and feelings, and the narration of it: "il diario che ho riempito non ha bisogno di rielaborazione. Esso è, in tutto e per tutto, il racconto."<sup>12</sup> (Rumiz 14) Significantly, the incipit and the end of the text, namely the two sections that frame the book, do not abide by this rule, and are narrated in the past tense. However, the first short paragraph follows the author's own dream about getting to the lighthouse, having just landed on the island. The sudden ending of the dream takes the reader directly to the present moment of the narrator's experience, into the dark room of the lighthouse, at a time when the journey is already happening. The last two paragraphs of the book narrate respectively the author's departure from the island and his first day back home. Only what happens beyond the journey itself, either in the mental realm of the unconscious or in the physical reality of the way back to everyday life, is relegated to the past. Thus, conceived and performed in the writing as coincident with the actual time of its happening, the whole narration of the journey acquires a "distinctive sense of present-ness, of being in the present." (Smith 4) At the same time, this narrative dimension of

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<sup>11</sup> See Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu 2016.

<sup>12</sup> "The diary I filled in does not need a re-elaborated version. It is the story in all respects."

the journey communicates a sense of urgency that, as in Prosa's play, is ultimately an attempt to make sense of the experience itself within the specific context in which it takes place.

As in Shauba's intense monologue and in Bahija's recorded voice, the only way to understand the present experience is by giving it depth in time and space, restoring the complexity that the present space carries within itself. Space in Rumiz's narrative also retrieves its own diachronic dimension, insofar as the author's own movement within space reveals both the temporal and the narrative stratification of the space itself. As David Harvey argues in his influential study of the postmodern experience of time and space, "if it is true that time is always memorialized not as a flow, but as memories of experienced places and spaces, then history must indeed give way to poetry, time to space, as the fundamental material of social expression," (Harvey 218) or space has to acquire at least the same visibility as time. Thus, Rumiz's narration of his Mediterranean experience acquires specificity and gets its meaning also from the memories of other journeys that often interrupt the main narration, creating a further element of movement that links the present Mediterranean with other spaces and past times. In Rumiz's book, the layer of "story space," which is, according to Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu's narrative categorizations, "the space relevant to the plot, as mapped by the actions and thoughts of the characters," (24) extends far beyond the Mediterranean island. In his present Mediterranean journey, the author is learning "*il gusto della divagazione e del periplo*,"<sup>13</sup> (Rumiz 76) so that he constantly strives to refocus his own physical and narrative trajectory. Only by digressing, going off on a tangent, and making an apparently circular itinerary, the traveler-narrator will ultimately be able to go back to the present place and get a better sense of its potential significance, both in itself and within the larger Mediterranean context it belongs to.

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<sup>13</sup> "the pleasure of digression and circumnavigation"

The other spaces that Rumiz revisits narratively are either other islands or promontories, and often themselves location of a lighthouse. The whole journey, and the narration of it, designs a complex itinerary that starts in the “enclosed” Atlantic Ocean of Pembrokeshire, in south-west Wales, and ends in the enclosed Mediterranean – or more precisely Adriatic – of Trieste, in north-east Italy, moving through different Mediterranean sites in Italy and Greece, before widening considerably the coordinates of its own trajectory by reaching Point Hope, in the extreme north of Alaska. Here, in the most disturbing *finis terrae* the writer has ever seen, “tutto si capovolge,” including Europe, “capovolta sulla mappa [...], tutto si inverte e tutto finisce.”<sup>14</sup> (Rumiz 83) The whole itinerary complicates any conventional and static view of the map, creating a space that is a “practiced place,” (De Certeau 117) where narrative movement, as opposed to the static dimension of a descriptive overview, is what ceaselessly transforms places into spaces and vice versa. Significantly, from this farthest land, where the whole earth seems to come to an end, the writer can glimpse the Diomedea Islands, whose Greek name would have eventually lead him to his current Mediterranean island “attraverso la leggenda omerica dei ritorni dalla guerra di Troia.”<sup>15</sup> (Rumiz 84) The reader cannot not know, and will not be told, how Diomedea is related to the Mediterranean island of the present book, whose real name and identity the author will not disclose. What she does know, however, is that there is a narrative link that connects different and distant places in Rumiz’s book, and that this narrative link creates and sustains the trajectory of the whole journey. “Just as literature may be a means of mapping the places represented in a given literary work, places themselves are deeply imbued with a literary history that has transformed and determined how those places will be ‘read’ or ‘mapped.’” (Tally 80) The narrative reference behind Rumiz’s mention of the Diomedea

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<sup>14</sup> “everything gets upside down”; “upside down on the map [...], everything gets reversed, and everything ends.”

<sup>15</sup> “through the Homeric legend of the returns from the Trojan war.”

Islands is to a lost epic of ancient Greek literature that narrated the returns of the Greek heroes after the end of the Trojan War. Both in this old epic tale and in Rumiz's contemporary travelogue, narrating and traveling cannot ultimately be separated, while De Certeau's *espace comme récit* powerfully reaffirms itself against the immobility of the map. The map of the whole world, then, which Rumiz experiences and somehow redraws according to his own itinerary, is put into question. Any space within the map can regain its multilayered meaning so as to potentially become a "heterotopic" space, a real space "in which all the real spaces are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." (Foucault 24)

Significantly, many of the island sites Rumiz visited, and revisits in the narrative journey of the book, are uninhabited, abandoned ruins that are all equally exposed to the implacable fury of natural elements – winds above all. The difference between Zante sea stacks and the lighthouse on Point Hope, or between Asinara Island and the lighthouse on Cabo da Roca, "il gran promontorio a ovest di Lisbona dove l'Europa finisce in un baratro ruggente,"<sup>16</sup> (Rumiz 113) may seem to lie simply in the feelings they raise. As in an old conventional opposition between Northern European romanticism and Mediterranean classicism, on the Atlantic spots a wild anguish replaces the sweet melancholy inspired by Mediterranean contexts. However, the juxtaposition and interaction among these different spaces do not just end in the further proposition of a sterile opposition between North and South; between, in other words, the Romantic sublime spectacle of wild oceanic settings and the exotic languor of the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean desolation that pervades Asinara and Zante, along with Capo Trionto in Calabria and the fort on the island of Caprera, depicts a sort of apocalyptic – or even better post-apocalyptic – scenario, in which a relentless and uncontrollable growth of

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<sup>16</sup> "the big promontory west of Lisbon where Europe ends in a roaring gorge"

nature is apparently taking over any residual human agency.<sup>17</sup> Asinara Island has moved from the status of prison camp, an heterotopic space of deviation par excellence,<sup>18</sup> to that of devastated place, where wild fennel covers the roofs of deserted dwellings and “in assenza di umani, [gli asini] erano i padroni del territorio e se lo contendevano con morsi e ragli strazianti.”<sup>19</sup> (Rumiz 34) On Capo Trionto, the only elements of life that still inform the abandoned lighthouse are “casette semiabusive, roulotte, cani randagi”<sup>20</sup> (where, significantly enough, human life can be only deduced from the presence of degraded human dwellings, but is not actually seen), and the two-meter tall underbrush that covers it all around. (Rumiz 52) In Caprera as well, a fig has grown in between two blockhouses, and again wild fennel and fat plants cover up the entire land, “come se l’uomo fosse una cosa estinta.”<sup>21</sup> (Rumiz 121)

The abandoned Mediterranean sites Rumiz visits on the long physical and narrative trajectory that eventually brings him to this remote and unnamed island all seem to share a substantial lack of human agency in front of the inexorable, harsh, and chaotic rule of nature. However, the various spaces along the itinerary reveal also evident traces of resistance to the silence and the annihilation that threaten them. These forms of resistance come both from the rejection of the very opposition between man and nature – which is replaced by an insight into their possible, residual but also renewed, integration – and the narrative dimension of the journey itself. The lighthouse is the ultimate bastion against complete destruction and loss of sense, so thin and yet so strong both physically, in its eternal fight against the whims of the sea and the sky, and symbolically, being the materialization of the possibility that only arises from

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<sup>17</sup> Science fiction offers many examples of this kind of scenario, going as far back as 1979, with Tarkovskij’s *Stalker*.

<sup>18</sup> In Foucault’s terms, heterotopias of deviation are “those [places] in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed.” (Foucault 25)

<sup>19</sup> “in the absence of humans, [donkeys] were the rulers of the territory, and they competed for it with bites and excruciating braying.”

<sup>20</sup> “small unauthorized dwellings, trailers, stray dogs”

<sup>21</sup> “as if man were an extinct thing.”



the ultimate encounter between the surviving forces of humans and nature. I will come back later to the lighthouse and the meaning it assumes in the specific context of Rumiz's Mediterranean narrative. Here I will just mention that, not by chance, the author's last memory of previous journeys – and the last destination of the narrative journey that finally takes him to the Mediterranean island at the core of the book – brings him back to the lighthouse of his hometown, Trieste. Even if now everything has disappeared, the image that returns to his mind is that of the last keeper's wife, who “non stava al faro. Lei era il faro.”<sup>22</sup> (Rumiz 137) The space of the lighthouse can witness the ultimate reconciliation, or rather the possibility of a renegotiated interaction, between modernity and tradition, humans and nature.

#### The Composite and Contemporary Voice of the Mediterranean

In the Mediterranean sites Rumiz revisits, a voice also emerges, and keeps struggling to be heard. It is the voice of a postcolonial Mediterranean space, which is too often represented from the outside, and spoken by hegemonic discourses.<sup>23</sup> This voice of the Mediterranean is itself a mix of, and the possibility of an encounter between natural and human elements. It is the sound of the wind, which is present everywhere in these ultimate outposts of humanity that Rumiz visits, and that cannot be repressed. In Zante, the writer, alone on the sea stacks, looks in vain for silence, chased by the obstinate voice of a night that is fully animated by unseen animal presences. And the wind here keeps speaking through the ancient stones, or rather makes the stones speak for themselves, restoring the necessary precondition for a narrative resistance against a hopeless abandonment: “Le vecchie pietre parlavano, ne ero sicuro. Non occorreva

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<sup>22</sup> “she was not at the lighthouse, she herself was the lighthouse.”

<sup>23</sup> For a postcolonial perspective on the Mediterranean see again Chambers 2008.

che fossero abbandonate da secoli. Pochi anni bastavano per instaurare un rapporto. Era sufficiente che il vento ne diventasse inquilino.”<sup>24</sup> (Rumiz 46)

But this Mediterranean voice is also the narrative voice of storytelling that emerges, for instance, among the abandoned ruins of Asinara Island, a place which fascinates travelers with the peculiarity of both its past history and its present condition, nurturing innumerable stories destined to be transmitted from one to the other. Moreover, the very name of the island, Asinara, seems to carry a sense of urgent reaction that comes from the concerted forces of animals and nature, against the invisible but tangible threat of oblivion: “Quel nome sull’atlante echeggiava come un raglio tremendo, con le sue tre ‘a’ piene di vento.”<sup>25</sup> (Rumiz 32) The donkey, last survivor and undisputed ruler of the whole island, raises his voice to denounce, together with the voice of the wind, the current condition of desolation and abandonment. However, this denunciation can also be seen as a way of raising awareness of the potentiality of a renewed Mediterranean narrative. This performative narrative would create alternatives by virtue of being the inclusive expression of all the different forms of Mediterranean life that, in a post-humanist, or “compost-ist” landscape, ask for recognition and respect.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, Rumiz’s remarks about ruins also gain a further significance. They cannot be considered “ruineri” – he says – but must be seen as noble “rovine.” Even though both Italian terms roughly translate the English term “ruins,” they do have a slightly different connotation, related to their different etymological derivation from Latin. The first term, “rudere,” which comes from Latin “*rudus*,” refers to the physical remains of an old monument, something that has come to an irretrievable bad condition. On the contrary, the term “rovina,” which derives

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<sup>24</sup> “the old stones were speaking, I was sure about it. It did not matter if they had been abandoned for centuries. A few years were sufficient to establish a relationship. They only need the wind to become their tenant.”

<sup>25</sup> “That name on the atlas echoed like a terrible bray, with its three ‘a’s’ full of wind.”

<sup>26</sup> See Iovino’s call to “see the Mediterranean as a living assemblage of multiple subjects and forces.” (Iovino 6) For the idea of “compost” as better describing the present condition of living in the world than post-human see Haraway 2015.

from the Latin verb “*ruere*,” “to collapse” or “to fall”, implies a movement, and refers to something that, at the end of a process, has fallen apart, or has been severely damaged. In other words, even if the resulting present conditions of “*ruineri*” and “*rovine*” might resemble each other, the first term is static and has a connotation of irreparability and loss, while the dynamic nature of the second leaves open the possibility of a further passage of state, of an “adjustment” that might come in the future. Moreover, as Rumiz himself suggests, “*ruineri*” are mute things, “ma le rovine parlano, hanno una voce flebile che anche un semplice restauro può spegnere.”<sup>27</sup> (Rumiz 122) Ruins do not ask, in other words, for the recovery of something lost, of some presumed original state never to be attained. On the contrary, they turn lack into their own potential strength, restoring “possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was.” (Agamben 267) In the Mediterranean space that Rumiz crosses several times in different directions and following various trajectories, both animate and inanimate things strive for attaining a new condition; a condition that does not simply coincide with a previous, always unattainable, stage, but is instead a re-negotiation of and an adaptation to their own co-existence in the present and for the future.

Thus, the two voices, the voice of nature, of the wind and the animals, and the voice of storytelling and narration are only apparently separated. Rather, they are deeply interconnected and interdependent, to the point that one is necessary to the existence of the other. Living the Mediterranean is narrating the Mediterranean, where both circumstances, however, do not pertain exclusively to the human, but can only happen in the space of the human’s re-negotiated identity. As nature cannot be interpreted as a category per se, detached and distinct from the supposed autonomous realm of the human,<sup>28</sup> then it can best express its voice in a uninterrupted narrative dialogue with the human. Throughout his physical and narrative journey, Rumiz

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<sup>27</sup> “but ruins speak, they have a feeble voice that even a simple restoration can extinguish.”

<sup>28</sup> See Latour 2004.

retrieves and gives new expression to a voice of nature that he himself was at first incapable to hear: “La natura, che all’inizio avevo guardato con l’imbecillità contemplativa dell’uomo urbanizzato, si è svelata tutt’altro che pacifica. Ogni metro quadrato di brughiera intorno al faro è in stato d’allerta e di tensione.”<sup>29</sup> (Rumiz 65-6) Nature, as the Mediterranean Sea in Lina Prosa’s play, is not, and cannot be, only “passive witness” of what happens on and around it. In the same way as the sea could not just register Shauba’s dramatic Mediterranean passage, but had to be an actor in the narrative denunciation of it, here the state of alert and tension in which nature presents itself to the writer does not only testify to the dangers it is exposed to, but also calls for a renewed awareness of them. Nature is then an active part of “a common world to share,” in Latour’s terms, an active interlocutor in social and political life, and, as such, it is constantly “reminding us of his existence.” (Serrès 29)

Nevertheless, any Mediterranean narrative voice still runs the risk of being unheard, or at least dismissed. This is the well-known destiny of the Greek mythological figure of Cassandra, who gives the title to a chapter of Rumiz’s book that precisely addresses the question of narrative and transmission of knowledge. In the Homeric poems, Cassandra manifests herself as voice, both in the *Iliad*, where she screams and howls, (*Iliad* XXIV: 893-4) and in the *Odyssey*, where she is just a “pitiful voice” (*Odyssey* XI: 421). In Aeschylus’ drama, she significantly keeps silent when the malicious Clytemnestra addresses her, but then she sings at great length in an intense dialogue with the Corypheus until, before being murdered, she prophesizes one last time, stating that she will soon howl her own death.<sup>30</sup> The urgency of Cassandra’s drama and her tragic destiny, which ultimately coincides with her constantly frustrated need to be listened to, resonates with Shauba’s call for a narrative space in her

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<sup>29</sup> “Nature, which at first I looked at with the contemplative stupidity of the urbanized man, has proven to be anything but pacific. Every single square meter of the moor around the lighthouse is in a state of alert and tension.”

<sup>30</sup> See Aeschylus’ tragedy *Agamemnon*.

Mediterranean real space of suffering and death. In particular, Christa Wolf's Cassandra intimately resembles Lina Prosa's African heroine. On the verge of death, in an intense stream of consciousness, Wolf's Cassandra narratively recovers her past in order to make her own version of it heard. While destined to be never acknowledged, here Cassandra is nevertheless, and paradoxically, pure narrative voice, uninterrupted monologue aimed at denouncing the injustice of a condition she has been forced into. However, as in the case of Shauha, the German Cassandra's ultimate message is neither negative nor passive. If, as Cassandra's herself acknowledges, "between killing and dying there's a third way: live" (Wolf 147) this third option needs to be narratively defended, even beyond the physical death.

The new Cassandra in Rumiz's book is Tamara Vučetić, a Croatian marine biologist, "capace di cantare il mare e al tempo stesso di denunciarne lo sfacelo,"<sup>31</sup> (Rumiz 66) who, in other words, engages narratively with past and present life of the sea, with its story of loss and damage, leaving open the question of its future possibilities. Tamara explicitly expresses frustration and the feeling of impotence that derives from the low level of concern her own science seems to be able to raise: "Una scienza incapace di spaventare è una scienza inutile. Noi biologi del mare abbiamo bisogno di un poeta per raccontare cosa succede là sotto e per accendere la nostalgia di quando il mare era ancora il mare."<sup>32</sup> (Rumiz 66) Narrative, in other words, is essential for scientific knowledge or, in Lyotard's terms, for the legitimation of the scientific discourse itself. Even in the current postmodern society, if we are to follow Lyotard's definition of it as the end of grand narratives, small gestures played within the system can still have far-reaching effects.<sup>33</sup> As Linda Hutcheon's careful distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism suggests, postmodern cultural works can provide valuable political critiques of

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<sup>31</sup> "able to sing the sea and, at the same time, to denounce its deterioration"

<sup>32</sup> "A science that is unable to frighten is a useless science. We biologists of the sea need a poet to narrate what happens down there and to raise nostalgia for when the sea was still the sea."

<sup>33</sup> See Lyotard 1984.

postmodernism itself, insofar as “critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernism to the philosophical and socio-economic realities of postmodernity.”

(Hutcheon 27) Thus, Rumiz ultimately takes over Cassandra/Tamara’s challenge, by telling the story of his Mediterranean experience as the journey towards a renewed awareness of narrative agency in the Mediterranean, and of the Mediterranean itself, or, even better, of the intimate connection between the two.

Again, in a sort of reversal of normative scenarios, on the island everything seems to work contrary to conventional expectations, so that at night Rumiz can see and distinguish things more clearly than during daytime: “Incredibile: la notte mi svela la terraferma e gli arcipelaghi che il giorno non è riuscito a mostrarmi.”<sup>34</sup> (Rumiz 43) At that moment, staring at the stars, he feels a need for knowledge and understanding that would go beyond the appearance of things. Even if he were to find the names of those stars in a planetary he carries with him, he would do that by following “istruzioni” that are “banali e spoetizzanti,”<sup>35</sup> while what he really needs is a narrative movement that would restore, and ultimately make sense of, the complexity of his whole present experience. (“No, io non voglio questo. Io cerco una narrazione.” Rumiz 43)<sup>36</sup> The narrative the writer is looking for and the Mediterranean context he has put himself in are mutually implied, since the narrative both creates and is created by the Mediterranean space that, in turn, can be finally grasped only by reestablishing it in narrative forms. Imaginary literary spaces and real “geospaces” (Piatti 2008) are inextricably tied, so as to become almost inseparable from each other.

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<sup>34</sup> “Incredible: the night discloses to me the land and the archipelagos that the day could not reveal.”

<sup>35</sup> “instructions”, “ordinary and disenchanting”

<sup>36</sup> “No, I don’t want this. I am looking for a narration.”

Significantly, the Mediterranean island guarantees “una nitidezza di sguardo”<sup>37</sup> (Rumiz 47) that resembles that of the desert, another “Mediterranean” space whose narrative dimension within a Mediterranean context I will analyze in the next chapter. But this clearness in turn both enables and is enabled by the particular condition of the writer himself in the specific space of the Mediterranean island. It is a condition of full adhesion to the present (“in quei giorni ho aderito al presente in modo totale, forse come mai in vita mia” Rumiz 13),<sup>38</sup> of “contemporariness” that, in Agamben’s terms, is the only way to live and be in the present, while keeping the necessary distance to sustain a critical interpretation of it. If, in the Italian philosopher’s words, the contemporary is a person who “firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness,” (Agamben 44) Rumiz’s contemporary gaze gets paradoxically its own light from the night of the Mediterranean, a night that illuminates the darkness of a broader threatening condition of silence, oblivion, and loss of meaning. In the apparently enclosed, static, and isolated space of this tiny Mediterranean island, the contradictions of the present time, which express themselves both within and beyond the island borders, become tangible, while, at the same time, giving insights into their possible futures. Engaging with the evolving definition of the term, the art historian Terry Smith states that “to be contemporary in this particular sense is to live in the thickened present in ways that acknowledge its transient aspects, its deepening density, its implacable divisiveness, and its threatening proximities,” (Smith 5) arguing that, contrary to Agamben’s elaboration of the concept, “contemporaneity itself is the most evident attribute of the current world picture.” (Smith 6) If we are to follow, then, Smith’s own interpretation of the category as characteristically pertinent to the current worldwide situation “of being immersed, utterly, in a world marked by an unprecedented diversity and depth of difference, by the coexistence of

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<sup>37</sup> “a clarity of sight”

<sup>38</sup> “in those days, I adhered to the present completely, as I have never done, maybe, in my whole life.”

incommensurable viewpoints, and by the absence of an all-encompassing narrative,” (Smith 5) we can see how, in Rumiz’s narrative, being at the center of the island, where “quel centro coincide con il centro dell’universo,”<sup>39</sup> (Rumiz 44) amplifies the perception of the whole world beyond the island itself. This is only seemingly paradoxical, as the apparent isolation of the island from the rhythm of “contemporary everyday life,” as we have already seen, enhances the perception of the interrelation of things that would otherwise go unnoticed: “L’isola disabitata è un’altra cosa [...] Su un’isola deserta [...] tutto è più semplice e contemporaneamente più esposto alla natura.”<sup>40</sup> (Rumiz 76) A contemporary Mediterranean narrative, then, might be able to convey this sense of contemporariness both within the Mediterranean space and in the larger world, insofar as it is capable of restoring a conception of the Mediterranean itself as a “composite locality that is simultaneously part of a decidedly wider world.” (Chambers 24)

### A Polyphonic Narrative

The narrative dimension of Rumiz’s journey is what also helps him situate his condition in a broader Mediterranean context in which he is not the only and absolute protagonist. He travels by himself, and the only human beings he interacts with on the island are the lighthouse keepers, solitary people themselves, “more monks than sailors,” (Matvejević 32) with whom he spends his own time rarely. However, he finds himself caught in a set of relations that sustain, and ultimately determine, both his experience and the narration of it.

The whole narrative is in the first person, and the narrator coincides with the writer, Rumiz, the teller of his own story. However, the narration seems to follow the wandering of the author’s own thoughts – the memories of his previous journeys together with the reflections on

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<sup>39</sup> “that center coincides with the center of the universe”

<sup>40</sup> “The uninhabited island is a different thing. On a desert island [...] everything is simpler and, at the same time, more exposed to nature.”



his current experience on the island. The narrative also moves accordingly with a rhythm that is characteristic of natural elements, and more specifically of winds, waves, and tides, which become companion-agents of Rumiz's narrative.<sup>41</sup> In the author's own words: "A ripensarci, mi rendo conto di non aver scritto io questa storia. Sono stati il vento e la marea. Io non ho fatto altro che registrarne la voce amplificata dal ventre cavo della torre."<sup>42</sup> (Rumiz 14) The air blown by the winds, on whose significant play in the whole narrative I will come back later, creates frictions on the surface of the sea, wrinkles that make the very surface rough and produce the constant, oscillatory, back and forth movement of the wave. And, although in the whole passing of the wave, through its crest and its trough, water particles do not go anywhere, they move in circle within the wave and create energy to be transmitted to succeeding water particles. In the phenomenon of tides, the variations of the sea level, determined by the combined effects of gravitational forces of the sun and the moon and the rotation of the planet, are also influenced by the winds, and tides go regularly back and forth, manifesting themselves in the recurrence of their ups and downs.

In the same way, Rumiz's whole narrative journey moves constantly across space and time, oscillating between different points of departure and arrival. By doing so, it rejects a teleological approach, while embracing a "tidalectics" that significantly evokes "the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic ... motion, rather than linear." (Brathwaite 44) On the one hand, this static journey, in which, like water particles in a wave, the writer does not physically go anywhere, maps the non-linear itinerary across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic that we have already followed, actualizing relations among the different places. On the other hand, Rumiz travels repeatedly back to the past of various

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<sup>41</sup> For a reframing of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "*agencement*" see Vinciane Despret 2013.

<sup>42</sup> "If I think about it again, I realize I am not the one who wrote this story. The wind and the tide did. I didn't do anything but register the amplified voice from the hollow womb of the tower."

Mediterranean sites, following the ups and downs of their own histories and testifying to the uncertain condition of their present. Thus, the author's Mediterranean journey creates also the necessary energy to enhance a movement forward, and to be transmitted to a potential Mediterranean future. Finally, this back and forth movement of the waves enhanced by the winds sustains a narrative movement into the past of Mediterranean narrative itself. In Homer's *Odyssey*, where "all that happens on earth or at sea happens in relationship to weather and to the day's cycle," (Schultz 302) the winds determine the various vicissitudes of Ulysses' own travel back to Ithaca, pushing his ship towards different places within the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, the cyclic movement of the waves seems ultimately to inform the rhythm of Ulysses' own narrative, which displays itself through a back and forth movement between past and present and among multiple Mediterranean locations. Narrative and the Mediterranean are again mutually implied, where the former enables the latter and vice versa, and where the movement of the narrative both creates and is created by the movement of the Mediterranean Sea itself.

Rumiz's struggle between the need of narration and the difficulty of bringing forward this narration within the instability and uncertainty of the current Mediterranean (and larger) world can be usefully framed in a conception of Mediterranean narrative as a manifestation of Donna Haraway's "sympoiesis," in which humans and nonhumans are inextricably linked in "tentacular practices." (Haraway 2016) Rumiz's Mediterranean narrative is sym-poietic not only in the cooperation, which becomes mutually necessary, between his own voice and that of the winds and tides, but also in the constant re-negotiation of his own narrative agency within a Mediterranean context that keeps challenging it: "Ho anche la sensazione che il mare aperto lentamente disidrata i pensieri, renda superflua la sintassi, le spiegazioni, come se fosse vano

comunicare l'incommensurabile.”<sup>43</sup> (Rumiz 93) The Mediterranean Sea, experienced from the island in its promising but also threatening openness, can confound normative coordinates, and paradoxically dry up thoughts, to the point that Rumiz writes only because he lets “che sia il mare a dettare la storia.”<sup>44</sup> (Rumiz 93) Only by opposing a strong resistance can he ultimately avoid being in turn relegated to silence.

By presenting his own narrative struggle in these terms, Rumiz gives voice to the broader theoretical difficulty, which Roberto Dainotto addresses, of reaching a critical balance between a Mediterranean intended as fluid and liquid, and the need for it to be at the same time a solid organ of resistance to the liquid modernity of globalization, which tends to silence its historical depth.<sup>45</sup> It is the same difference between being contemporary in the sense of living in the present and witnessing its contradictions from within, as opposite to being contemporary in Agamben's sense of being able to live in the present, while also maintaining the necessary critical distance to understand it and act in it. The Mediterranean, in this framework, can and must be embraced and made sense of in the fluidity of its movements and cyclic recurrences, which guarantee its vitality and enhance its future agency. At the same time, it must be restored in the complexity of its multilayered meaning that only can make it an instrument of resistance to in-difference, and a possible alternative to a homogenized globalization.

Rumiz's Mediterranean narrative, moreover, is not only multidirectional but also multisource and inter-textual. The book contains the narration of other narrative instances, both written and oral, that have somehow determined the writer's own narrative journey to the Mediterranean island, and that all contribute to communicating depth and movement in and of the Mediterranean as a whole. On a first level, the whole text is interwoven with more or less

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<sup>43</sup> “I also have the feeling that the open sea slowly dehydrates thoughts, that it makes syntax and explanations redundant, as if it were vain to communicate the incommensurable.”

<sup>44</sup> “the sea to dictate the story.”

<sup>45</sup> See Dainotto 2011.

direct references to various other narrations, which are also mostly travel narratives. The *Odyssey* definitely stands out, not so much for the occurrences in which it is explicitly mentioned, but rather for the indirect and allusive ways in which it ultimately informs Rumiz's narrative. The Greek epic is however accompanied by multiple works by Verga, Melville, Verne, Buzzati, Walcott and others, as if Rumiz's own journey would only be possible in the inter-textual interaction with these other narrative journeys. And even though most of these texts are openly referred to throughout the book, the narrative relation with them extends beyond those explicit references, creating a more complex web of allusions and interferences, where intertextuality is not simply stated, but actually performed. For instance, the lighthouse keepers' experience of the harshness of a life that depends on the sea for its sustenance immediately recalls Sicilian images, "già viste nei *Malavoglia* di Verga."<sup>46</sup> (Rumiz 24) At the same time, however, Verga's ideal of the oysters is implicitly alluded to through the image of the "villaggi chiusi a ostrica"<sup>47</sup> that can be found in the inner areas of the Mediterranean, where "la civiltà pelagica scompare."<sup>48</sup> (Rumiz 28) As was already the case with Prosa's play, this ideal is ultimately rejected for its connotation of passivity, whereas Rumiz's (and Prosa's) Mediterranean "ideal" calls for an act of resistance, which in turn requires opening up to the sea and participating in the movement that comes from it.

On a further level, the oral dimension of a Mediterranean narrative, which significantly also lies at the heart of the Homeric question, plays a fundamental role in Rumiz's island narrative. Listening to other stories about the island has decisively nurtured the author's own fascination with it. And these stories come themselves from all the different angles of the Mediterranean, from a Turkish captain as well as a waiter in Marseilles, and also from a

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<sup>46</sup> "already seen in Verga's *The House by the Medlar Tree*."

<sup>47</sup> "villages closed like oysters"

<sup>48</sup> "the pelagic civilization disappears."

Dalmatian archeologist, a visionary who “tracimava di immagini più che di dati scientifici.”<sup>49</sup> (Rumiz 110) These are visual narratives that resonate with each other all around the Mediterranean basin, narrating and ultimately constructing its own imaginary. These stories also complicate the map of Rumiz’s own itinerary, drawing a further erratic trajectory that rejects Glissant’s conception of a single, and monolingual, root of the Mediterranean itself.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, such a complex interaction of multiple voices within the main narrative ultimately reveals the intrinsic narrative dimension of the Mediterranean that Rumiz himself creates.

The very complex and close web that sustains the whole narrative journey also involves and spans across different media, which in turn involve different temporalities and open further narrative scenarios. The writer first comes across the island through a friend’s e-mail, whose whole text interrupts the main narrative, so that the friend’s voice also directly participates in it. Moreover, the e-mail comes from someone who, in the author’s own words, “stando al timone ti recita, anzi ti canta, l’*Odissea* a memoria.”<sup>51</sup> (Rumiz 20) The oral dimension of narration, and the specific dimension of “singing,” seems to be particularly relevant in Rumiz’s narrative, contributing to its polyphony, while also addressing the polyphony of the whole Mediterranean. In Rumiz’s book the narrative polyphony of the Mediterranean goes inevitably back to and re-actualizes Homeric epics. Oral narrative and singing, profoundly interconnected as to be ultimately coincident, are the defining dimensions of the two Greek poems, both externally, for the very process of their transmission, and internally, for the development of the story they narrate. “Sing” is the opening word of the *Iliad*, where the poet evokes the help of the Muse in order to narrate Achilles’ story. In the *Odyssey*, Ulysses, who narrates his own story at the court

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<sup>49</sup> “overflowed with images more than scientific data.”

<sup>50</sup> See Glissant 1997.

<sup>51</sup> “while at the helm, would recite for you, or better would sing, the *Odyssey* by heart.”

of Alcinous, is interrupted by the bard Demodocus, who himself narrates, or rather sings, the story of the Trojan horse and the sack of Troy. In this episode, narrative, with outcome of its strong emotional impact on Ulysses – as it leads to the hero’s revelation of his true identity – greatly affirms its performative power. Moreover, the faculty of hearing, upon which the act of narration relies, outdoes, or rather ultimately incorporates, that of sight, where the blind bard, who has the gift of a different kind of sight, can make Ulysses re-visualize the tragic story in which he had taken part. In the same way, Rumiz’s Cassandra, the marine biologist who denounces the current exploitation of the Mediterranean Sea, while going herself blind, can however still “sing” the sea and raise its ultimate protest. Finally, Rumiz himself, blinded on his Mediterranean island by the frightening darkness of the night that impedes the view of the lighthouse, can still have a synesthetic perception and hear “il grido lungo della luce.”<sup>52</sup> (Rumiz 14) The Mediterranean context, in other words, seems to be able to activate alternative ways of perceiving, which in turn require a narrative predisposition within and towards the Mediterranean itself.

If the *Odyssey* seems to foster Rumiz’s narrative imagination, while also informing the circumstances of his real Mediterranean journey, a book by a great “sea narrator” is the ultimate determinant of the author’s decision to leave. When acknowledging this further influence, Rumiz cannot refrain from mentioning that this narrator, “anima omerica,”<sup>53</sup> (Rumiz 22) before landing on Rumiz’s Mediterranean destination, had circumnavigated Ithaca. It is as if the journey to the mysterious island of Rumiz’s book can only take place in the Mediterranean context of Ulysses’ physical and narrative journey. And it is a journey in which the impossible compromise between traveling and returning home, between the whole world and Ithaca,

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<sup>52</sup> “the long scream of the light.”

<sup>53</sup> “Homeric soul”

between the “thirst of knowledge” and the ultimate landing site is precisely what guarantees the endless back and forth movement of the narrative itself.

While on the island, Rumiz also gets to know on the radio about the Mediterranean project that Francois Beaune has been pursuing for years, “in cerca di una narrazione che accomuni le genti delle diverse sponde.”<sup>54</sup> (Rumiz 128) Thus, the immediacy of network connectivity through e-mail communication coexists with the longer narrative time of the novel (here represented by both the *Odyssey* and the sea narrator’s narrative) and with the supposedly endless time of the stories collected across the Mediterranean, which all get re-actualized and re-happen simultaneously in the space of Rumiz’s contemporary narrative. In this context, the narrative island at the “center” of the Mediterranean where Rumiz has finally landed seems to be able to become a node in a network of multiple exchanges, where the whole Mediterranean, as in Beaune’s project, can be made sense of moving from a re-collection of its own stories. However, these stories should not be necessarily valued for what they have in common, as in Beaune’s own intention. Rather, they can be more usefully put into dialogue with each other for the different ways in which they relate to, experience, and ultimately narrate a common area, which is precisely the intent that sustains my own work. Also, the metaphor of the network should not be read as suggesting an equivalence between Rumiz’s narrative network and the Internet global network. Whereas “the civilization of the web ignores complexity”, to the point that in a mediatic communication the phenomenon of migration can be reduced to a bipolar conflict between two shores of the Mediterranean,<sup>55</sup> narrative can restore the complexity of this Mediterranean through a communication that is precisely non-linear and erratic. Such a

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<sup>54</sup> “looking for a narration that would bring together the peoples from the different shores.”

<sup>55</sup> “Già il fatto che si parli di due rive contrapposte dice che la battaglia è persa. Perché due rive? Perché abbiamo accettato questa semplificazione bipolare? La civiltà del web ignora la complessità. La espelle dal mondo.” “The only fact that people talk of two opposing shores means that the battle is lost. Why have we accepted this bipolar simplification? The web civilization ignores complexity. It expels it from the world.” (Rumiz 126)

renewed narrative Mediterranean is therefore a space that is not flat, where the surface of the sea “non è né ruvida né liscia, ma increspata,”<sup>56</sup> (Rumiz 141) whose breaking points are glitches that interrupt the fluid continuity, creating open possibilities for the future.

Finally, the same attempt at counteracting the velocity and flatness of web communication in order to save this specific Mediterranean site (and possibly the whole Mediterranean) from becoming a “non-place of supermodernity,” (Augé 1995) affects the condition of the reader, who is kept from knowing the precise identity of the place. On the contrary, she is called to undertake herself a journey that involves, again, both the narrative and the physical dimension: “Voglio che fatichiate a trovarla, che la navigazione sia ardua, che vi perdiate nei libri prima che negli arcipelaghi.”<sup>57</sup> (Rumiz 17) Thus, the reader herself participates in a Mediterranean journey that is also intended as mediated initially by texts and other narratives, and that, contrary to the traveler’s space of contemporary tourism, requires the traveler’s efforts and her full presence in the space itself.

Through the interaction of all the different voices that take part in the narration of it, Rumiz’s Mediterranean journey challenges its apparently static condition and complicates its first-person narrative. It ultimately manages to create a narrative Mediterranean that is – and can only be – polyphonic, in the Bakhtinian sense of a symphony of many incommensurable voices, which participates in a world that is also irreducible to unity.<sup>58</sup> Rumiz’s Mediterranean voice expresses itself in a constant movement of transformation, adjustment and renegotiation of its own position within the space that creates and sustains it. It is the space of a Mediterranean that can be lived, experienced, and made sense of only by being narrated, a space where traveling by sea and travel narrative ultimately coincide.

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<sup>56</sup> “is neither rough nor smooth, but rippled”

<sup>57</sup> “I want you to have a hard time finding it, I want the sailing to be difficult and you to get lost in the books before than in the archipelagos.”

<sup>58</sup> See Bakhtin 1984.



### A Mediterranean Mix of Languages

Rumiz's Mediterranean is only partially attentive to the "multilingual concerns" (Bertacco 2014) of a postcolonial Mediterranean, in its attempt to address, or at least acknowledge, the complexity of the language situation in the Mediterranean context. However, the endless movement of the winds, as it expresses itself narratively in the text, provides a compelling metaphor of the very movement of languages in the Mediterranean, a movement that is itself the result, and the expression, of constant challenges and renegotiations.

In the remote and isolated Mediterranean island, where the writer has the lighthouse keeper as his only human companion, the complexity of linguistic interactions best manifests itself once again in an indirect way, passing through the medium of the radio. Significantly, the radio is always on in the little quarter of the keeper, even when he is not there. In Rumiz's opinion, lighthouse keepers never stop listening to songs in response to their inner fear of void and silence. However, this obsessive presence of language even in the absence of any human presence seems to respond to a need that goes beyond fear, a need for expression and communication that implicitly resists and nullifies any possible threat of being reduced to silence. Also, the radio signal on the island struggles, and ultimately fails, to find stability on a single station. On the contrary, the radio keeps intercepting different stations, and any new station brings about a different language, from Arabic to Spanish, Italian, Croatian, Turkish, and Greek. If, in the Mediterranean, communication happens through an "indecorous" mix of different languages, this condition does not need necessarily to reinforce, as it seems at first to do in Rumiz's remarks, an essentialist view of the Mediterranean itself, identified with a southern *mare nostrum* whose particular language even a northern Italian would not understand. If this mix of languages defines a space "dove l'alterità è più immediatamente percepibile e la

mescolanza inevitabile,”<sup>59</sup> (Rumiz 82) then it cannot be “our” Mediterranean in any essentialist way, a set of common properties to a few defined peoples. On the contrary, it can become the defining cultural space of our contemporariness, and, as such, an epistemologically useful microcosm of the larger world. The endless movement of the radio signal follows again a Mediterranean itinerary that is unfixed and refuses any stable chart, whose trajectory both brings close and pulls away the different shores, alternatively opening and closing its own constraints, and where no voice can ultimately impose itself over the others. Thus, the movement of languages, as the whole narrative movement of the journey, contributes to destabilizing any unified and unifying conception of the Mediterranean, whose unstable identity enables and requires interaction, friction, and constant change.

However, in the unending succession of different languages spoken through the various radio stations, the word that ultimately captures Rumiz’s attention is the Greek term for “pandemonium,” which, according to him, “sembra riassumere questo Mediterraneo senza pace, che ci scappa di mano.”<sup>60</sup> (Rumiz 19) The writer’s own way to make sense of the Mediterranean coexistence of languages paradoxically leads, in the end, to the isolation of a single word in the very language that is often simplistically associated with the Mediterranean as a whole, given the significance of the Greek cultural heritage for the Western world. Moreover, the very word “pandemonium” cannot help but bringing back the medieval conception of the sea as formless, thus threatening in its materialization of the danger of corruption and lack of order.<sup>61</sup> By asserting the meaning of the word as representative of the whole Mediterranean condition, Rumiz ends up conveying an idea of the Mediterranean as a

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<sup>59</sup> “where alterity is more immediately perceptible and the mixing is inevitable”

<sup>60</sup> “seems to sum up this Mediterranean without peace, that slips out of our hands.”

<sup>61</sup> The medieval equivalence between sea and the danger of corruption extends its influence well beyond the Romantic rehabilitation of the sea, as the title of Horden and Purcell’s study of the Mediterranean, *The Corrupting Sea*, suggests.

place of unrestrained disorder and tumult. In this way, he runs the risk of annihilating the potentiality of Mediterranean movement by reducing it to utter chaos.

This is not the only way in which the author seems to fall into the traps of a too simplistic Mediterranean thinking that his narrative ultimately still manages to avoid. He seems to propose again, in relation to the very question of language, a sterile dichotomy between a Mediterranean that is supposedly capable of preserving fruitful traditions of sociality, exchange, and encounter, and a modernity that has been only capable of destroying them. Within this view, however, his own relationship with global English cannot finally resolve its ambiguity, whereas it keeps oscillating between a formal rejection and an implicit acceptance, to the point that his attitude towards it conforms to those he tries to unmask. He explicitly asks himself if the hegemonic language has not in the end destroyed a Mediterranean capacity “di imbastardire e amalgamare, costruire luoghi e parlate d’incontro,”<sup>62</sup> (Rumiz 80-1) as it is for him a language that facilitates communication, but not encounter. The Mediterranean, on the contrary, is a space that retains ancient words that modernity would not be able to create anymore. Not only do these words seem to be able to preserve a particular relationship between the signifier and the signified, but they also travel all around the basin without changing either their form or their meaning.<sup>63</sup> Particular examples of these words are place names, whose large presence in the island testifies to the fishermen’s need to know exactly every angle of the island in order to be able to reach the best sea bottoms. In the era of the satellite navigation system, Rumiz harshly deplores the loss of toponyms, words “richly semiotic in nature and deeply entrenched in culture.” (Radding and Western 400) However, the author’s complaint does not lead to the

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<sup>62</sup> “to bastardize and blend, to build spaces and languages of encounter”

<sup>63</sup> The example Rumiz offers is the word “nevera,” which he heard in Croatia, Palestine, Sardinia, Greece, a word that “sa di freddo improvviso e celebra quel cortocircuito tra mare e montagna che rinfresca l’aria senza preavviso, sanando uno squilibrio.” “tastes like sudden cold, and celebrates that short circuit between sea and mountain that cools down the air without notice, restoring the balance.” (Rumiz 75)

suggestion of a better way forward, an alternative to, or a rethinking of such a loss, the possibility of a re-functionalization that would prevent the opaqueness of those signs. Thus, his *laudatio temporis acti* runs the risk of becoming an end in itself, which would end up suggesting only a useless, let alone impossible, refuge from modernity in the ivory tower of an already lost tradition.

The pervasiveness of English is also largely conveyed through Rumiz's narrative, being it the first foreign language that appears in the book, as the language in which the sailors address the writer before leaving for the island. Presumably, although he never reports any dialogue and does not mention it explicitly, Rumiz also communicates in English with the lighthouse keepers. Moreover, in spite of his strenuous defense of a Mediterranean linguistic diversity, he cannot at the end avoid interposing English expressions into his own Italian narrative. These expressions (such as "Just in case" and "on the rocks"), far from being self-evident for an average Italian speaker, show the adherence to the marketing idea that a bit of English can be appealing even for a reader who can only guess the precise meaning of it. The same idea might explain the fact that the author goes as far as reporting his own thoughts as spoken to himself in the very English that, according to him, kills real communication. Finally, even if what he calls "*la voce stessa del Mediterraneo*,"<sup>64</sup> (Rumiz 30) namely an indistinguishable mix of different Mediterranean languages whose symphony excludes the participation of English, runs the risk of being a too simplistic view. Not only does it annihilate any differential agency in an undifferentiated magma, but it also masks power imbalances that exist even among Mediterranean languages themselves.

However, the play of the winds in Rumiz's narrative can offer a better framework within which to read the parallel play of languages in the Mediterranean context that Rumiz's narrative

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<sup>64</sup> "the very voice of the Mediterranean"

ultimately still strives to create. In *Il Ciclope* winds hold a special place, not only – as we have seen – in the sense that they contribute to the very movement of narration, but also for the specific way in which their own movement articulates itself within the narrative. In the single space of a chapter (*Tramontana* 23-26), when Levantazzo, the harsh and desertic wind that comes from the east, is finally over, the calm brought about by “bonaccia,”<sup>65</sup> and the immobility that accompanies it, raises a feeling of impatience and apprehension that pervades the writer and the surrounding environment alike. If Rumiz feels restless in the dead calm atmosphere, since it is a very unusual situation for someone born and raised in Trieste, where bora blows relentlessly, the whole environment gets suspended in a condition of wait and trapped in an oppressive obfuscation of vision. However, the dead calm sea is not destined to last for more than a few hours. It preludes in fact to a further movement, reactivated suddenly by the coming of sirocco, the wind from the south, which carries the humidity of the sea, and a smell of burned grass and dust that reminds Rumiz of Algiers and Lampedusa. The restless search has not however come to a proper end, and “bonaccia” returns, as disturbing in its passive pervasiveness as before. But again, the condition of anxiety and immobility that the dead calm sea brings about must ultimately resolve into the arrival of a further, different, wind, coming this time from the north, which gives the title to the whole paragraph: tramontane. With the tramontane the long search seems finally to come to a halt, temporary as it might be. Significantly, tramontane is “più costante, meno nervosa. Non scopa il mare, lo agita di creste schiumate e spruzzaglia. Non serpeggia: avanza [...] e va su con un crescendo regolare.”<sup>66</sup> (Rumiz 24) The last wind to come, then, that will likely impose itself only until a new one will soon come to replace it, is a wind of strong and enduring resistance, a wind that can keep the

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<sup>65</sup> “calm sea”

<sup>66</sup> “more stable, less tense. It does not sweep the sea. It agitates it with foamy crests and spindrift. It does not slither: it moves forward [...] and goes up with a regular surge.”

Mediterranean Sea moving constantly forward, while the spurts of its water will not hide, but rather bring forward, its contradictions and the challenges it has to face. Thus, in the Mediterranean narrative of the book, the complex interaction among the various winds in the Mediterranean geographical space can be seen as a metaphor of the equally complex interaction of different languages. They both present themselves as a perpetually renegotiated mix of influences that come from all different directions and shores, where these currents constantly juxtapose, overlap, and run after each other. Moreover, such a metaphor can ultimately restore the complexity of this interaction, conveying the image of an endless search for something never to be achieved, a condition of perpetual potentiality that is a mutual exchange of different forces, but it is also, inevitably, a conflict. This conflict does not need to be intended necessarily as a “clash of civilizations,” (Huntington 1996) but rather it must be taken into account as a continuous, and imbalanced, game of strengths, where tramontane indicates the route towards an enduring resistance; a resistance that can ripple the sea and make it an indispensable agent of change, thus providing an answer to Chambers’ call for a diverse Mediterranean modernity.

### A Narrative Island

Rumiz’s Mediterranean narrative that, as we have seen so far, sustains and creates the author’s own Mediterranean journey, manages to put into question conventional dichotomies – such as modernity and tradition, Europe and the Mediterranean, North and South – while also complicating unilateral perspectives on the Mediterranean space and revealing its inner contradictions. The Mediterranean that comes out of this narrative is a multilayered space that the writer himself can make sense of only by paying attention to the interaction of different forces within in, and by restoring the complexity of its spatial and temporal density.

The final destination of Rumiz's real journey, where both the journey itself and the narration of it supposedly take place, is, however, a precise location. Rumiz's Mediterranean island, whose real reference the author does not reveal on purpose, is nevertheless a specific interaction of time and space within the complex and dense Mediterranean the narrative itself reveals. How does, then, this location contribute to the narrative? More specifically, how does the narrative experience of this tiny and unknown island at the supposed center of the Mediterranean further challenge any simplistic conception of the Mediterranean itself, putting into question binary oppositions between land and sea, local and global, center and periphery? By embracing the apparent contradictions between the two poles of each of these binaries, the Mediterranean island narratively reveals itself as a potential space that comprises, and gets meaning from, land and sea at the same time; a space that, while being localized, can also address and respond to global concerns, and that, from its supposedly marginal position in the global world, can also become a center of critical thinking and effective engagement.

An interesting feature of this localized place is precisely its undisclosed identity in the context of the narrative, a characteristic that it also partially shares with the places involved in Shauba's story. In Lina Prosa's play, the exact point of departure of Shauba's tragic journey also remains unknown. It is supposed to be a real place in a North-African country, but the absence of a precise reference for it enlarges the potentiality of the narrative itself. The strong female community that surrounds Shauba and sustains her journey, for instance, by not being confined to a precise location, can be possibly imagined for, and applied to, other locations and other stories. At the same time, Shauba's own experience potentially resonates with the experience of many other women, coming from different African countries, so that her narrative can ultimately contribute to challenging the dominant narrative of migration itself. Moreover, in the fictional narrative of Prosa's play, Lampedusa is both a real and an imagined place. It is

mostly a projection of Shauba's own desires, an unknown, and as such only imagined, island never to be reached. However, this dreamed and unattainable landing site is what ultimately nurtures the potentiality of a future beyond the impossible actuality of the present. Then, the only real and identifiable space in the whole of Prosa's narrative is the space of the sea, which is, however, intimately charged with multiple and metaphorical meanings. In the same way, the Mediterranean island at the core of Rumiz's journey is undoubtedly a real place, whose name the author refuses to reveal in the attempt to preserve the island from mass tourism (though this choice might actually end up raising even more curiosity, a consequence that one would hardly believe Rumiz is not aware of). However, the island's consistent condition of anonymity and its lack of a reference in the real world leaves open, within and beyond the fictional world that the narrative creates, the possibility for it to be more than its own reality, or even to be a fantasy all together. Similarly to Shauba's Lampedusa, and to the prototype of Ulysses' Ithaca, Rumiz's island becomes a destination that is ultimately both real and imagined, whose meaning may lie more on the narrative journey that leads to it, than on its localized space.<sup>67</sup>

The island comes into Rumiz's narrative as characterized by the minus sign, under an image of lack and emptiness. Even before getting to the island, Rumiz knows from other people's remarks that "pesce ed erbe aromatiche a parte, sull'Isola manca tutto. Più che un'isola, è uno scoglio disabitato e lontano."<sup>68</sup> (Rumiz 12) The island seems not to provide many useful resources, except from those, however, that come spontaneously from its own land and from the sea that surrounds it. What at first presents itself as lack has to be more accurately identified with the absence of products directly related to human activities, whereas a functional integration of land and sea seems to be crucial for the life of the island itself. Significantly, then,

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<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, Konstantinos Kavafis' literary revisiting of the Odyssey's archetypal journey in his well-known poem *Ithaca*.

<sup>68</sup> "apart from fish and aromatic herbs, the island lacks everything. More than an island, it is an uninhabited and distant rock."



a more accurate definition of the island would be that of “a rock,” where the latter is a much smaller piece of land that sticks up out of the sea, and that does not imply any human presence. Thus, the minus sign is contemporarily affirmed and denied within the author’s own narrative. The realization of the absence of human and human-related elements on the desert rock is counterbalanced by the simultaneous revelation of the island’s fundamental relationship with – or literally of its immersion into – the surrounding environment. Lack, then, gets turned upside down, and becomes the positive marker of something that exists only in the potentiality of its perpetual becoming, which precedes and nullifies any actualization.

At the same time, the writer immediately perceives and describes the desert rock as far away, although the points of reference with which he measures this supposed distance remain vague. What is the island distant from? Is the distance “calculated” precisely in relation to the absence of a significant human presence? Or is it rather the geographical distance of a supposedly peripheral space from an unspecified center? Given Rumiz’s intention to reach the island in order to escape his own everyday rhythm of life, one might suppose that the island allows him to reach a metaphorical distance from the contemporary global world. This distance, then, would be better identified with the difficult accessibility that the island itself provides, and that would have somehow preserved intact its traditional way of life. If this were the case, Rumiz would reaffirm here a long-lasting topos of island isolation and apparent insularity, as “colonial narratives and the tourist industry have long depicted island space as remote, isolated, and peripheral to modernity.” (Deloughrey 802) In this perspective, the author who, as we have already seen, cannot refrain from showing traces of colonial attitude in his narration, could also somehow end up adopting the very attitude of the tourist that he explicitly condemns.

However, Rumiz finds himself immersed in a much more complex site, as it emerges from his own narrative. The Mediterranean island he describes and invents at the same time,

while being apparently isolated, can't help but endlessly bring forward a set of contradictions that immediately annihilate the very possibility of a either real, or metaphorical, distance from the surrounding world. "Le piccole isole sono il paradigma delle contraddizioni. Le cerchi per scappare dal mondo, e il meteo ti sbatte al centro di un universo senza pace. Sono periferia e ombelico."<sup>69</sup> (Rumiz 31) It is, then, through his own narrative journey within and beyond the island that Rumiz comes to realize how his elected Mediterranean island does not reject, but rather condenses the very contradictions of modernity he thought, at first, he would manage to escape there.

The apparent contradiction between movement and immobility, where the latter tends to be applied to a backward Mediterranean as opposed to a modern Northern Europe, gets also problematized, and ultimately nullified, in the narrative dimension of Rumiz's island, whose continuous changes the writer cannot even keep up with: "Chi ha mai detto che su un'isola deserta non succede niente? Appena ti rilassi, qui tutto ti cambia sotto il naso. Il tempo muta a una velocità impressionante e con lui la luce, gli odori, la temperatura."<sup>70</sup> (Rumiz 73-4) Far from being immobile, the island moves at a very fast pace that is, however, not determined by humans. The island changes according to a kind of internally regulated movement, which cannot be recorded in narrative forms, being itself incommensurable with human time.

On the contrary, when change on the island is imposed from the outside, and is perceived as a manifestation of exterior forces, then the island, and its inhabitants within it, shows resistance to the "liquid-ation" that change seems to carry with itself. The situation of the donkey is exemplary in this perspective, since he condenses in himself the very contradiction between modernity and tradition, as well as movement and immobility, while also pointing to a

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<sup>69</sup> "Small islands are the paradigm of contradictions. You look for them in order to flee the world, and the weather throws you in the middle of a universe without peace. They are periphery and navel."

<sup>70</sup> "Who ever said that nothing happens on a desert island? As soon as you relax, everything here changes under your nose. The weather changes at an astonishing speed, and with it the light, the smells, and the temperature too."

possible way out of it. Dispensed from his duty since the arrival of the cableway, which nowadays carries the heaviest cargos, blind and ignored even by the lighthouse keepers, the last old donkey is “prigioniero e al tempo stesso monarca della sua isola.”<sup>71</sup> (Rumiz 32) If isolated and self-regulated life on the island has always meant for him freedom from rigid constraints, modernity has even apparently enlarged this freedom, relieving him from his duties, while at the same time entrapping him in the very impossibility of performing his own task. However, he does not give up. Unlike his predecessor, the last female specimen that apparently killed herself in order to avoid a dishonorable old age, he keeps looking at the world with his only eye, carrying on his own gesture of hope and resistance. He is himself a Cyclops, a being whose apparent deficit might actually signify an alternative way of looking at things. I will come back later to the deeper meaning that the figure of the Cyclops assumes in the whole of Rumiz’s narrative. Here I will just say that it is, again, a figure of the potentiality of lack, and that, as such, recalls the other mythical, and Homeric, figure of Cassandra, whose meaning in the text I already discussed. As it was the case with the unheard prophetess, the donkey/Cyclops’ tragic destiny might not be an end in itself, but instead lead to a possible overcoming of its own preconditions. Significantly, the condition of the donkey applies to the lighthouse keeper, who also belongs to the island as both its prisoner and its king, and whose work has been reduced too by the advent of new technologies. However, similarly to the donkey, he does not flee from the island. Rather, he accepts it as neither an exile nor a kingdom, but a living space that constantly changes, and that requires him to adjust and find different ways of acting in it.

By means of his own physical and narrative journey within the space of the island, Rumiz seems to eventually deconstruct his own conception of the island as an a-temporal escape and a peaceful shelter. Rather, through the very process of its own narration, the island

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<sup>71</sup> “prisoner and monarch at once of his own island.”

gets progressively reinvented as a space of contradictions that can usefully come to the forefront of the narrative itself. In the “spazio inquieto”<sup>72</sup> of the island, where peace is ephemeral, the writer realizes that “isole felici non esistono,”<sup>73</sup> and the first other example that comes to his mind is, significantly, Lampedusa. (Rumiz 92) The island that, in Prosa’s play, enhances Shauba’s imagination for a better future, cannot avoid here revealing itself as a space for which conflict might be a more suitable category; a productive category, as long as conflict itself is intended, as in Rumiz’s own narrative of the winds, as the product of constant change and mutual adaptations of different forces.

Moreover, the apparent isolation and self-containment of Rumiz’s island is counterbalanced by the intrinsic condition of openness to the outside space that the island itself, as a small land surrounded by water, embraces. If any island is “the site of a double identity – closed and open” (Bongie 18) Rumiz’s island “è un’isola lontana da tutto eppure al centro di tutto,”<sup>74</sup> (Rumiz 17) whose exact position, once again, the reader is not supposed to know. The author feels however the need to reassure his implicit reader of the actual existence of the island, by pointing to the fact that a spatial representation of it can be found on any Mediterranean map. Thus, the reader is required to exercise a double effort of imagination. He can picture the island for himself only by imagining a map that would in turn provide a cartographical image of the island itself: “In producing [his] representation of a world (that is, the narrative itself), the narrator also invents or discovers the world presented in the narrative. For readers, this narrative makes possible an image of the world, much like that of a map.” (Tally 49) In this way, Rumiz seems to reproduce what David Lodge described as the novelists’ “split between, on the one hand, the desire to claim an imaginative and representative truth for

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<sup>72</sup> “restless space”

<sup>73</sup> “happy islands do not exist”

<sup>74</sup> “an island far from everything, and yet at the center of everything”

their stories, and on the other the wish to guarantee and defend that truth-claim by reference to empirical facts.” (Lodge 18) However, Rumiz ends up embracing the apparent contradiction of the split itself, creating a Mediterranean narrative in which the reference to the outside world is affirmed and denied at the same time. Such a complex interaction of reality and imagination in and for the very space that Rumiz’s narrative creates contributes to an understanding of the whole Mediterranean, beyond the tiny island, as both a concrete and an imaginary space, where “lo spazio reale e lo spazio immaginario, legati tra loro da un’intima corrispondenza, invocano per sé percezione, sfidano il lettore a ritrovare il referente, ritrovare se stesso e il proprio ambiente, in un raffinato gioco di decodifica della complessità.”<sup>75</sup> (Iacoli 22)

In the literary cartography of such a complex space, notions of center and periphery also lose their normative coordinates. An island at the center of the Mediterranean can be virtually imagined, and positioned on the map, at any corner of a Sea whose position, in turn, can be imagined both at the edge and at the very center of the world map. Only in the narrative movement of its own decentralization, Rumiz’s Mediterranean island can also become a center. In her proposal of an unconventional Mediterranean thinking that would focus on the sea rather than on the land and apply cyber-theory to a renewed conception of the Mediterranean space, Miriam Cooke notes:

The islands that are geographically centered in the Mediterranean are rarely centers of power; rather, they are crossroads, sometimes sleepy but sometimes also dangerous places of mixing, where power is most visibly contested and where difficult choices must be made. These islands can be either centers or

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<sup>75</sup> “the real space and the imaginary space, interlinked by an intimate correspondence, invoke perception, challenge the reader to find the referent, to find himself and his environment, in a subtle game aimed to decipher complexity.” (my translation)

peripheries. The meaning attached to their location will depend on the subject position of the speaker, which in turn determines where the perimeter of the Mediterranean is drawn. (Cooke 296-7)

In Rumiz's text, the position of the island, as well as that of the writer (the speaker) within it and of the reader of the text, is not localized, so that it ultimately remains open and unstable. Thus, Rumiz's narrative island, and all the different islands it comes to possibly represent, can be a periphery and a center at the same time, since its undetermined but still localized space undoes the very spatial opposition between the two. As such, this narrative island responds to Derrida's call for the impossible reduction of difference to a single center, where "the center is never absolutely present outside a system of differences." (Derrida 279) The Mediterranean island can ultimately represent a peculiar kind of capital – *la capitale* –, which, in Derrida's conception, should promote difference within its own culture, and whose modernity does not rely on capital – *le capitale*. (Derrida 11-12)

If "every island is a fragment of the whole that is always already in the process of transforming the particular into something different from its original self," (Bongie 18) Rumiz's island and the whole Mediterranean around it are mutually involved in a process of movement and change that, while rejecting fixed geographical coordinates, does participate in the larger movement of change of the global world. By virtue of being at the same time a real and localized place – an island within the Mediterranean Sea – and an imaginary open space that refuses localization, Rumiz's narrative island also puts into question any easy polarization of local and global, insofar as neither of the two terms can get fully realized here. If, following Lyotard's suggestions, we acknowledge that "resistance lies in the little narrative, in locality and particularity," precisely "because the local is where the global happens," (Currie 111, 112)

then the very dichotomy between the two loses its *raison d'être*, nullified by the phenomenon of a globalization that implies both standardization and proliferation of difference. Then, in the contemporary globalized world, where “fragments have acquired a new awareness, a new self-consciousness of their role in an increasingly visible totality,” (Currie 133) the apparent immobility of the local might be a specific form of resistance to a movement that is imposed on it from the outside.

This form of resistance to globalization, by virtue of embracing – and turning into a strength – the apparent contradiction globalization itself proclaims between stability and movement, seems to be particularly strong in the geographical space of the island, as Elizabeth Deloughrey's – *Routes and Roots* – a comparative study of Caribbean and Pacific Island literatures, reveals. As the title of her book suggests, in the apparently isolated context of the island both “routes and roots” need to be acknowledged and put forward, where “refusal to migrate can be resistance to colonial trajectories rather than lack of cosmopolitanism.” (Deloughrey 816) The Mediterranean island that comes out of Rumiz's narrative embraces this apparent contradiction between roots and routes, isolation and openness to the outside world, the local and the global. The writer refuses to reveal the nation to which the island belongs since “il mare non ha frontiere,”<sup>76</sup> (Rumiz 17) so that the island seems to belong to itself, enclosed within its own roots, and to the whole sea that surrounds it at the same time. Moreover, Rumiz acknowledges the impossibility for anyone to fully belong to the island, while the island itself remains open to “the possibility of infinity;” (Walcott 159) it is the infinity of possible belongings created by the parallel infinity of routes that converge and crisscross in the island's

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<sup>76</sup> “the sea has no frontiers”

space. “Essere del posto su un’isola disabitata e lontana da tutto è un concetto terribile che mi fa impazzire. Qui nessuno è del posto.”<sup>77</sup> (Rumiz 101)

Narrated as such, Rumiz’s island is caught in a complex and uninterrupted movement between de-territorialization and its own re-territorialization. In other words, it does not abide by what Dainotto describes as “un concetto di globalizzazione nomadica, senza centro e territorio – liquido, insomma, come osservava Zygmunt Bauman.”<sup>78</sup> (Dainotto 9) On the contrary, from its own local territory, central and decentered at the same time, Rumiz’s narrative island can tackle Dainotto’s challenge that “non è più quella di deterritorializzare e liquefare, ma di ri-territorializzare.”<sup>79</sup> (Dainotto 10) Well aware of the risks associated with a fluid conception of the Mediterranean that would align itself with the fluidity of Bauman’s “liquid modernity,” Dainotto further asserts the necessity to individuate “specifici agenti umani e sociali, non il mare, come soggetti storici e veicoli di una nuova utopia,”<sup>80</sup> (Dainotto 10) which would resist the fluid movement of a homogenizing globalization. However, the local but non localized island that Rumiz creates in his own narrative manages to propose a different kind of agency, where human and non-human forces can coexist and work together, insofar as both the donkey and the lighthouse keeper can be parallel agents of resistance.

### Land and Sea

The island overcomes the very dichotomy between fluid and solid, rather pointing towards a possible coexistence of the two, in the form of integration between land and sea. In the local language, the center of the island, Rumiz has been told, gets the name of lizard or salamander.

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<sup>77</sup> “To be a native on an uninhabited island far from everything is a land concept that drives me crazy. No one here is a native.”

<sup>78</sup> “a conception of nomadic globalization, with no center and no territory – namely liquid, as Zygmunt Bauman observed.” (my translation)

<sup>79</sup> “is not anymore about de-territorializing and liquefying, but rather re-territorializing.”

<sup>80</sup> “specific human and social agents, rather than the sea, as historical subjects and vehicles of a new utopia.”



(Rumiz 44) The writer does not suggest any specific meaning for the name, nor reports any story that would explain it. However, we can at least note that the lizard is commonly associated with a symbolic meaning of regeneration, adaptability, strength and resistance, while the salamander, similar to the former, was in ancient ages thought to be able to resist fire. Both animals are cold blooded, which means that they are particularly able to adapt to their surrounding environment, by simply taking on the outside temperature. Moreover, while the lizard is a reptile, the salamander is an amphibian, hence a water dweller.<sup>81</sup> By getting its name from either of these two creatures, or better from both of them at the same time, the center of the island becomes associated with a form of resistance that combines the forces of earth and water.

If the lizard and the salamander have to be understood as symbolic personifications of the core of the island, then the island as a whole can be seen as a site where the ultimate integration of land and sea is particularly significant. The desert rock of the island constantly adapts to, and renegotiates its relationship with, a Mediterranean Sea that does not simply surround it, but also participates in it. The geographical mass of the land, in other words, articulates itself within the larger space of the mass of water to which it belongs, in a relationship of mutual exchange. Thus, Rumiz's island can be seen as a narrative example, real and imaginary at the same time, of what Philip Hayward has called "aquapelagos," a concept elaborated as a critique of the common orientation in Archipelago Studies. Where the latter see aquatic realms "as anything more than watery spaces between and connecting land masses," (Hayward 1) aquapelagos, on the contrary, are "entities created when humans occupy and interact with integrated island and aquatic spaces." (Hayward 2) While Hayward initially used the concept to describe the assemblage of land and water masses within a group of islands, he

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<sup>81</sup> For an "amphibian" approach of Mediterranean ecocriticism, see Iovino 2013.

himself later applied it also to single islands, characterized by the interactivity of humans with a combined terrestrial and aquatic environment. Christian Fleury, building upon Hayward's definition of the aquapelago, also links it to the concept of "mari-tory," as parallel to territory, first coined by a group of French geographers and useful to emphasize the three-dimensionality of sea space, which better reveals its close relationship with land. In his geographical study of the territorialization of marine spaces, Fleury suggests that islands are "intermediate spaces" (Fleury 11) between land and sea, where the delicate, and precarious integration of the two is mostly visible, while being constantly renegotiated.

The geographical and geo-social concepts of the aquapelago and the maritory, which presume the combination and interaction of human and non-human, as well as terrestrial and aquatic, elements in the single space of the island, can be also applied to the real, and at the same time literary, space of Rumiz's island. Here, the life of the only inhabitant, namely the lighthouse keeper, is fully dependent on the life of the sea, which in turn is determined by the changing combination, and constant interaction, of natural elements, like winds and waves. This constantly changing interaction, and the possibility of an integration never to be fully achieved are also responsible for the movement of the narrative, hence significantly contributing to the narrative dimension of the island itself. As we have already seen, the polyphonic narrative voice of the book, and the multiplicity of Mediterranean languages it constantly refers to, depend on and move accordingly to the movement of the winds. As in the archetypal Mediterranean journey of the *Odyssey*, where the winds, by determining Ulysses' journey back to Ithaca, also guarantee the narration of it, in *Il Ciclope* as well winds and waves sustain Rumiz's physical and narrative journey.

If, "in its 'synecdochal' imagination of land and sea, the Mediterranean urges us to consider the existential intersections of the human and the non-terrestrial dimension of its life

beyond all ‘fables of harmony,’ whether cultural or ecological,” (Iovino 10) then Rumiz is keen to narratively respond to Serenella Iovino’s ecocritical call for a new perspective on the Mediterranean. It is a perspective that would look at the Mediterranean, and the larger world beyond it, “*from the sea*, [...] with the eyes of the castaways,” in order for humans to become “cultural amphibians.” (Iovino 11-12) Rumiz does seem to favor what he calls “occhio pelagico” as opposed to “sguardo di terraferma.”<sup>82</sup> (Rumiz 36) When looked at with a pelagic eye, the apparent lack of resources and isolation of the island, that a first “earthly sight,” from a human-centered perspective, seems to suggest, can reveal itself as a different kind of richness. It is a richness that revolves around non-human, both natural and animal, elements, and that, as such, is even incommensurable with the space, and time, of the human narrative it inspires.

However, the pelagic perception of the world Rumiz acquires on the island and explicitly embraces seems ultimately to confuse him, thus compromising his own clarity of vision. By losing the coordinates of his own position within the very world he observes, the writer ends up focusing on the perception of his own being only, overwhelmed by “la centralità intollerabile di questa mia presenza solitaria nel cosmo.”<sup>83</sup> (Rumiz 39) He does feel (in Iovino’s words) like a “naufrago,”<sup>84</sup> (Rumiz 40) having voluntarily escaped from the world – a metaphorical ship that does seem on the verge of sinking – and managed to get to an uninhabited island. The condition of the castaway, in which Rumiz’s pelagic perception seems to get fully realized, does not, however, provide him with a clear view of the possible integration of land and sea in the space of the island he temporarily inhabits. In Prosa’s play, Shauba’s shipwreck, although tragic and apparently hopeless, does leave open the possibility of a renewed encounter between land and sea within the Mediterranean. In the closing lines of her

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<sup>82</sup> “pelagic eye”; “mainland view”

<sup>83</sup> “the unbearable centrality of my solitary presence in the cosmos.”

<sup>84</sup> “castaway”

dramatic monologue, the African migrant could at least imagine and envision the ultimate coming together of the sea's water, under which her ship is fatally destined to sink, with the desertic land of Lampedusa, the island she is never going to reach. In other words, the narrative and imaginary dimension of Shauba's journey could arrive where her real journey could not, pointing to the possibility of a future, and positive, outcome of her own tragic destiny, only to be achieved through a re-affirmed coexistence and cooperation between land and sea. Rumiz's shipwreck, instead, proves unable to suggest a way out of the impossible balance between the two elements. The pelagic perception it enhances does not, as in Shauba's experience, sustain an enduring gaze of resistance that moves back and forth from the land to the sea. On the contrary, the writer's pelagic eye circumscribes, instead of opening up, the potentiality of a gaze from the sea, whose ultimate function simply consists in revealing to the author the inner archipelagos of his own soul. (Rumiz 40)

When he goes back to the concept of a pelagic perception of the world later in the book, however, Rumiz explicitly defines it as the ability to have "*la visione d'insieme*," an overall view of things that "*a Berlino non possono capire, e nemmeno a Roma o a Parigi, perché la loro è una cultura di terraferma.*"<sup>85</sup> (Rumiz 92) Here, then, the direction of the pelagic perception is reversed from the inner self back to the outside world. Nevertheless, it seems to coincide only with an unspecified way of looking at things from the sea, which, as such, would reaffirm a dangerous, and sterile, opposition between north and south, even within the larger Mediterranean space. Rumiz's pelagic perception apparently leaves many possible questions unanswered. Is the observer's position on the sea sufficient to guarantee a pelagic perception that, as such, would be instead impossible to achieve from the dry land? How would, then, such a perception be able to preserve the material agency of both land and sea, taking them away

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<sup>85</sup> "they cannot understand either in Berlin, or in Rome, or in Paris, as they have a dry land culture."

from to the fluid movement of things, within a globalized world that tends to annihilate the possibility of their resistance? What role would then the land that actually constitutes the island play in facilitating such a pelagic perception, if the sea has to be always, and uncritically, privileged over the land?

Beyond the explicit, though confusing, stances Rumiz takes with regard to the interaction of land and sea, and his contradictory attempts at defining the pelagic perception that the island has supposedly provided him with, it is the island he narrates that ultimately points towards a possible integration between land and sea. In the space of the Mediterranean island the writer inhabits and creates through his own physical and narrative journey, the apparent stillness of the land does not necessarily contrast with the movement of the surrounding sea. On the contrary, both land and sea appear as co-dependent in a movement of resistance that derives its strength precisely from the possibility of a co-agency of the two elements. Thus, hope for the future of the island comes, for instance, from the so-called “grande fossa,” a fertile area of the Mediterranean Sea, close to the island, which appears, again, as a real and an imaginary/narrative space at the same time. Although Rumiz does not physically travel to this zone, he reaches it by navigating through his own imagination on the cartographical space of a map, and experiences the place through someone else’s narration of it as “una specie di utero che, nonostante gli oltraggi della modernità, continuava a regalare formidabili pescate.”<sup>86</sup> (Rumiz 130-1) Areas of the sea, as of the land, can keep putting forward their own fertility as a way of resisting to the devastating force of modernity that tends to swallow them up.

Also, in Rumiz’s island narrative, sea and land get repeatedly confused with each other, coexist with and exist within each other, as the sea seems at times to assume the connotation of the desert, more specifically. Rumiz narrates the Mediterranean Sea that surrounds the island as

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<sup>86</sup> “a sort of uterus that, despite the offenses of modernity, was still giving extraordinary catches.”

a “desertic sea” (Rumiz 82) an “immense desertic space,” (Rumiz 95) and an “endless desert of water.” (Rumiz 96) The sea, and the desert, can reserve unexpected tools of salvation to the person who travels across them, so that this act of traveling across those spaces involves, according to Rumiz, “un atto di fede assoluto.”<sup>87</sup> (Rumiz 102) However, those two opposite, but also complementary, Mediterranean spaces might well themselves enhance, while being in turn determined by, a coexistence and possible co-agency of humans and non-humans – as both Rumiz’s island narrative and the desert narrative I will explore in the next chapter show. Moreover, Rumiz refers to his unnamed Mediterranean island and to the other Mediterranean island of Lampedusa as “desert rocks,” (Rumiz 93) hence lands that belong to the sea. As in Shauba’s dramatic gesture, Rumiz’s narrative also suggests that the aquatic and the earthly perspective do not need to be necessarily opposite. A Mediterranean real and narrative space can only realize itself in the ultimate encounter between sea and land, being this land an island within the sea or the counter/other-sea of the desert.

Thus, Rumiz’s Mediterranean island, fulcrum of this renewed encounter between land and sea, “naviga quietamente in questa distesa”<sup>88</sup> (Rumiz 141) of the Mediterranean Sea it belongs to. This island is itself a ship, Foucault’s heterotopic space *par excellence*, a site and a counter-site, “a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea [...] the greatest reserve of the imagination.” (Foucault 27) As any heterotopic space, in Foucault’s own conception, Rumiz’s island is both open and closed, isolated and penetrable, while also having “a function in relation to all the space that remains.” (Foucault 27) It might be, then, what Foucault describes as the “heterotopia of illusion,” whose role is that of creating a space of illusion that ultimately reveals the illusory character of any real space. In Rumiz’s experience, it

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<sup>87</sup> “an absolute leap of faith.”

<sup>88</sup> “sails quietly in this expanse”

gives him the illusion of an escape from the world, only to reveal at the end the impossibility of such an escape. Significantly, the writer also refers to it as an “astronave,” (Rumiz 41) a space ship capable of leading him to unknown spaces that, by challenging his own knowledge and his presumed certainties, could make him better understand the very space of the world which he comes from. This narrative island ultimately enhances what Rumiz calls a “salutare insicurezza,”<sup>89</sup> (Rumiz 123) which can in turn lead him to question, and try to make sense of, the contradictions of the whole space that lies beyond the island itself.

The metaphor of the island as a ship once again reaffirms its unquestionable condition of movement, which challenges any simplistic view of the island space as still and isolated in its stubborn defense of tradition. Moreover, Rumiz’s island/ship has the shape of an iguana, which gives the name to one of the book’s chapters. Similar to the lizard and the salamander, the iguana is an extremely resistant animal, easy to adapt to the surrounding environment, insofar as it periodically sheds its skin and changes its color. However, the iguana’s color change does not, as in the case of the chameleon, constantly happen as a form of camouflage, by which the reptile assimilates itself to the outside world. The iguana changes its color only in specific situations – related to various factors, such as stress, breeding issues, or even the exposition to the sun – in order to better adapt to, and constantly renegotiate its position in, the environment. The iguana, then, indicates a way to respond to the threats of modernity, by means of a changing movement that is neither assimilation nor domestication, but that does perform its own gesture of adaptation.

Finally, the present and contemporary space of the island is able to reassess its depth in time by linking the memory of its past with the open possibilities for its own future. As in Derrida’s thought, memory does not mean necessarily preservation of the past, but rather

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<sup>89</sup> “a healthy uncertainty”

openness towards the future, “the memory of the future – the movement of memory as tight to the future and not only to the past, memory turned toward the promise, toward what is coming, what is arriving, what is happening tomorrow.” (Derrida 382-83) Rumiz’s island is a site that, as we have already seen, can contribute to raising awareness of the dramatic consequences that modernity has brought about, “di cui gli uomini sembrano aver perso la memoria.”<sup>90</sup> (Rumiz 65) While spending his time on the uninhabited island, the writer has the privileged condition to observe closely, with his pelagic eye, the animal life on the land. He immediately perceives how this life is interconnected with life on the sea, and consequently easily altered by any external force imposed on it. Rumiz is struck by the attitude of the only hen apparently left on the entire island, which “sta barricata in un pollaio vuoto e troppo grande per un animale solo. Dove sono finiti gli altri polli?”<sup>91</sup> The lighthouse keeper provides an answer to his question, revealing that the seagulls, “inferociti”<sup>92</sup> by the shortage of food in the sea, ate all the chickens. (Rumiz 65) The situation is dramatic and urgent, and Rumiz’s tone communicates anger and frustration. However, as in the case of the Croatian marine biologist, the denunciation of the current condition is not an end in itself. It is rather a call to resist further annihilation, while imagining a renewed Mediterranean that would promote inclusiveness and cooperation between territorial and marine spaces, humans and non-humans.

Rumiz’s Mediterranean island, which we have seen as both real and imaginary, a local space though not localized, can finally represent all the possible islands in which the Mediterranean is fragmented, and, as such, propose a model to act within the Mediterranean and beyond it. Although the Mediterranean itself is an enclosed sea, surrounded and circumscribed by land, this condition does not have to necessarily translate in Glissant’s terms of “a sea that

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<sup>90</sup> “which men seem to have lost memory of”

<sup>91</sup> “barricaded itself in an empty henhouse, too big for a single animal. Where do the other chickens end up?”

<sup>92</sup> “made furious”



concentrates,” as such opposed to the Caribbean, “a sea that diffracts.” (Glissant 33) Rumiz’s narrative island can, on the contrary, pave the way to recover the polyphonic voice of the Mediterranean itself,<sup>93</sup> where, following Cacciari’s philosophy of the archipelago, “la fatica [...] consisterà nell’*armonizzare*, senza ridurle violentemente a Uno, le diverse figure, le diverse *isole*, tutte ‘salve’ nell’individualità del proprio carattere, ma tutte colte nella comune ricerca, nel comune amore (*philia*) per quel Nome o per quella Patria che a tutte manca.”<sup>94</sup> (Cacciari 20) The voice of the Mediterranean cannot be Glissant’s “thought of the One” simply because unity in the Mediterranean only comes out of movement, difference, and change.

### The Lighthouse

Rumiz’s narration of his own “adventure” on the Mediterranean island starts *in medias res*, as he begins the story by narrating the very moment of his landing on this unknown island. The writer’s first contact with the island, which in the fictional realm of the book is recalled as if occurred in a dream (so that the island itself immediately moves from the real world to a metaphorical and imaginary space), is threatening and frightening. The fury of the atmospheric agents, the absence of any human presence, and the condition of darkness that impedes a clear view of the surrounding environment all contribute to the initial sense of uneasiness and danger that the space of the island seems to communicate:

Era quella che si dice una nottataccia. Salivo per il sentiero a picco sul mare  
lottando con le raffiche, e nel buio dovevo badare a dove mettere i piedi. Da

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<sup>93</sup> For the suggestion of polyphony as a more suitable category to the Mediterranean than Glissant’s creolization, see Fabre 2002.

<sup>94</sup> “the difficulty [...] will be to *harmonize*, without violently reducing them to One, the different figures, the different islands, all “safe” in the individuality of their own character, but all caught in their shared search, in their shared love for that Name and that Homeland that they all lack.” (my translation)

ovest arrivava il temporale, la folgore mitragliava un promontorio lontano  
simile a una testuggine. Ero sbarcato appena in tempo: con quel mare in  
tempesta non sarebbe arrivato più nessuno per chissà quanti giorni. Ero solo,  
non conoscevo la strada del faro e l'Isola era deserta. Miglia e miglia lontano, il  
resto dell'arcipelago era inghiottito dal buio e dalla spruzzaglia. Non una luce,  
niente.<sup>95</sup> (Rumiz 11)

Rumiz's condition upon his arrival on the island, as well as the condition of the island itself, cannot help but, once again, bringing the reader back to the Homeric narrative of the *Odyssey*. More specifically, given the title of Rumiz's book, whose meaning we have not engaged with yet, the author's narrative landing on the Mediterranean island inevitably – and admittedly on purpose – resonates with Ulysses' landing on the island of the Cyclopes. As part of the larger narration, at Alcinous' court, of his own adventurous return to Ithaca at the end of the Trojan War, Ulysses recalls the “dark night” in which he landed, together with his companions, on an unknown island. Winds –, which, as we have already pointed out, determine the Mediterranean movement of Rumiz's narrative journey – are responsible for this further delay in Ulysses' trip back to Ithaca. At a time when the lead of the ship is left to the helmsman and to the winds themselves, whose concerted effort is precisely intended to accelerate the way back home, Boreas comes and alters the route, as Tramontane does in Rumiz's narrative. Moreover, in Ulysses' narration, a thick mist, together with the absence of the moon in the sky, prevents the

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<sup>95</sup> “It was what they call an awful night. I was going up on the path along the cliff, fighting the gusts, and in the darkness I had to be careful of where I put my feet. The storm was coming from the west, the lightening was firing at a distant promontory similar to a tortoise. I had landed just in time: with that stormy sea nobody would come for who knows how many days. I was alone, I did not know the way to the lighthouse and the Island was desert. Miles and miles away, the rest of the promontory was swallowed up by the darkness and the spindrift. Not even one light, nothing.”

Greek heroes from even seeing the island before actually landing on it, leaving them in the darkness, and suspended in a condition of uncertainty. (*Odyssey* IX)

If Rumiz deliberately narrates his own landing on the Mediterranean island along the lines of this specific passage of the Homeric narrative, the Mediterranean island that makes possible his physical and narrative journey has other significant points of contact with the island of the Cyclopes in Ulysses' story. As we have already seen, Rumiz's island comes into the narrative under the sign of lack, as it evidently lacks traditional human activities and interventions on the land, while being, however, rich in natural resources. Similarly, in the Homeric island the Cyclopes "neither plow with their hands nor plant anything, / but all grows for them without seed planting, without cultivation, / wheat and barley and also the grapevines." (*Odyssey* IX: 108-10) The Cyclopes live by the products that grow spontaneously, namely wheat and grapes, Mediterranean products *par excellence*. Furthermore, Ulysses recalls how, in front of the bigger island of the Cyclopes, lies a smaller island, inhabited only by sheep, that is now believed to be the so-called Cyclops stacks in Acitrezza, Sicily. Here, again, the land "never plowed up and never planted, / it goes without people" (*Odyssey* IX: 123-24) although, Ulysses notes in his "expansionist" mentality and "aggressive intentions," (Schultz 305-6) it would be suitable for agricultural use and economic development, as it provides water and fertile ground. Rumiz's Mediterranean "desert rock," then, might be seen as a combination of the two Homeric islands, a very small portion of land in which the only, and always temporary, inhabitant – the various lighthouse keepers that alternate themselves on a regular basis – sustains himself with the spontaneous resources that come from both the land and the sea that surrounds it. By virtue of its narrative association with the Homeric island of the Cyclopes, Rumiz's Mediterranean island further reveals itself as a multilayered space, a specific place that is, however, undisclosed in its real reference, so that its narrative dimension can open it to

further possible associations. *Il Ciclope*'s island is Rumiz's own Mediterranean destination and the author's narrative creation. It is also the narrative island of the Homeric Cyclopes, and, as such, it is also Sicily, with which the Homeric island is in turn identified. Finally, it could possibly be all the different Mediterranean islands it presumably shares its characteristic with.

By retracing Ulysses' narrative steps, Rumiz both actualizes and reinvents Ulysses' journey, and his adventure with the Cyclops in particular, providing it with a new meaning in the contemporary space of the Mediterranean in which his own journey takes place. In the narrative space of Rumiz's island, not only does the figure of the Cyclops reveal Rumiz's own indebtedness towards the Homeric narrative, but it also more specifically refers to the lighthouse built on the island itself. In this ultimate bastion of human presence within the whole island, Rumiz spends most of his time on the island, more or less interacting with the different keepers. The Cyclops/lighthouse re-proposes, and condenses in its both real and narrative figure, the contradictions of the island and the whole Mediterranean space it belongs too. It is at the same time a positive and a negative symbol, and a technological, thus somehow human, product, though in the shape of an animal. Finally, by virtue of its own complex narrative dimension, it further points towards a Mediterranean alternative that lies in the struggle for adaptation and negotiation of one's own position within the larger world.

Since its first appearance within the narrative, the lighthouse reveals itself as an ambiguous space. It is definitely a shelter from the quasi-apocalyptic scenario of the island and the sublime nature that rules over it, on the night in which Rumiz arrives from the sea. Thus, it feels reassuring and familiar, providing the writer with light and the illusion of a dwelling in the middle of a dark night on the Mediterranean Sea. As the title of the first chapter of the book suggests, the lighthouse is also Jonah's whale of the biblical story, a space that saves life, as it offers a defense against the inexorable power of winds and waves, while also, however,

swallowing up and taking possession over this very life. “Fuori rinforza, gira da Scirocco a Libeccio. Sono nella macchina di luce, nella sua pancia, come Giona nella balena. La prima notte nel faro non è ancora finita, e il Ciclope si è già impossessato di me.”<sup>96</sup> (Rumiz 12)

Jonah’s time inside of the whale’s belly is supposed to clear up his mind and bring him awareness of his own duty as a prophet. Similarly, the lighthouse can provide Rumiz with a better perspective on the Mediterranean world he intends to narrate, thus enhancing his own “narrative duty.” Then, the lighthouse can be the point of departure, and the final destination at the same time, of a renewed narrative journey across the Mediterranean itself.

At the same time, however, and again from the first moment in which Rumiz looks at it, the lighthouse appears as frightening and threatening as the whole island on which it lies. “Cercava l’intruso con l’unico occhio da ciclope. Sfolgorava, ma proprio la fonte di luce era buia come la pece, più nera della notte stessa. Era irata e mi stava cercando.”<sup>97</sup> (Rumiz 11) The lighthouse is the Cyclops, the enormous, “horrendous monster” of Ulysses’ story, who treats Ulysses and his companions as intruders more than guests, and who, at the end of Ulysses’ short stay in his cave, furiously looks for him in vain. It is not by chance that Rumiz narrates his own perception of the acute feeling of ephemerality that the lighthouse communicates, a “senso di vulnerabilità di queste torce assediate dai marosi, dalle guerre, e dall’incuria degli umani.”<sup>98</sup> (Rumiz 46) Despite his great physical strength and his undisputed rule over the island, Polyphemus is also a figure of vulnerability, as he cannot at the end prevent Ulysses’ deceit and gets hurt in the most vulnerable part of his whole body – his only eye. This characteristic of vulnerability that the Cyclops/lighthouse carries in Rumiz’s narrative further complicates the

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<sup>96</sup> “Outside, [the wind] is strengthening, moving from Sirocco to Libeccio. I am in the machine of light, in its belly, like Jonah inside the whale. The first night in the lighthouse is not over yet, and the Cyclops is already taking over me.”

<sup>97</sup> “It was looking for the intruder with its single Cyclopean eye. It was shining, but the very source of light was pitch dark, more black than the night itself. It was irate and was looking for me.”

<sup>98</sup> “a feeling of vulnerability of these torches besieged by breakers, wars, and human negligence.”

possibility of a clear distinction between its positive and its negative connotation, reaffirming the ambiguity of the whole figure/symbol.

The lighthouse is also, obviously, a real technological, yet analogue, tool, originally intended to provide fundamental navigational support for sailors and to warn them against dangerous coastlines and reefs. As such, its function has been radically modified by the advent of the GPS, which has made its existence redundant, as Rumiz does indeed point out. However, within Rumiz's narrative, the lighthouse itself is still associated with an immense narrative power, insofar as the writer presents it as the source of endless and fascinating stories about journeys across the sea. The various Mediterranean lighthouses Rumiz visited, and revisits in the narrative dimension of his book, oppose a strong resistance to the annihilating threats of modernity that, on the contrary, seem to have already prevailed over the Atlantic lighthouses. Rumiz's Mediterranean lighthouses sustain a real and imaginary, physical and narrative correspondence among each other, which is ultimately able to create an "anti-panopticon" structure of diffraction and multiplicity within the enclosed space of the sea. By listening to the stories that resonate along his Mediterranean itinerary, Rumiz "navigates" with the storytellers, (Rumiz 56) so that navigation and narration on the Mediterranean Sea further condense within the real and narrative figure of the lighthouse.

Moreover, the specific lighthouse Rumiz has decided to visit materializes as a tenacious possibility of resistance against the destruction that many lighthouses have instead witnessed. As in the case of the other ruins the writer has come across during his narrative journey, in the Mediterranean context ruins can be still alive, refusing a passive surrender to the annihilating forces of a globalizing world. "Al Nord non c'era più niente, solo rovine, e la navigazione era ormai satellitare,"<sup>99</sup> Rumiz observes recalling his trip to the Arctic, in which he also realized

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<sup>99</sup> "In the north, there was nothing anymore, only ruins, and navigation was now satellite-controlled."

that “la luce non serve in un mare dove per tutta la stagione navigabile il sole non tramonta.”<sup>100</sup> (Rumiz, 61) On the contrary, his Mediterranean lighthouse has not completely renounced serving its own purpose, and has resisted becoming just the relic of a past whose memory is destined to be lost within a short time period.

This does not mean that Rumiz’s lighthouse has not negotiated its own form of adjustment to modernity. If “at any given time, lighthouses of the major maritime powers usually contained a mix of old technologies being retained or phased out, new technologies being phased in, and experimental technologies undergoing trials,” (Schiffer 279) Rumiz’s Mediterranean lighthouse is undoubtedly an example of such a mix of old, new, and experimental. It does use the optical system of lightening provided by the Fresnel lens, where the concerted movement of the little bulb and the lens fascinates Rumiz. While observing it from a close distance, the writer is caught in the optic effect “che ti fa credere che sia la torre stessa e non la sua luce a ruotare.”<sup>101</sup> (Rumiz 55) The constant movement of the little “mirabile arnese”<sup>102</sup> (Rumiz 54) enhances the potential movement of the much bigger tool in which it is included. In the same way, the little movement of Rumiz’s Mediterranean narrative creates the potentiality for the larger movement of a whole Mediterranean narrative, which would promote resistance to the threats of being silenced.

Despite its movement of adaptation to the change brought about by modernity, the Mediterranean lighthouse that Rumiz visits has not become automatized, while the human presence appears to be still fundamental for its own survival. The life of the lighthouse keeper still regulates itself accordingly to the rhythm of the surrounding environment, keeping up with abrupt changes and adapting to the difficulties and the hardship this very life still requires.

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<sup>100</sup> “Light is useless on a sea where, for the entire navigable season, the sun does not set.”

<sup>101</sup> “that makes you believe that the tower itself, and not just its light, is rotating.”

<sup>102</sup> “marvelous tool”

Although now different keepers alternate themselves at regular intervals on the island, the symbiosis of the man with the technological tool, in which he both works and lives, has not vanished. By performing his tasks, the keeper is constantly aware of the necessity of a daily maintenance of a place that is so exposed, and vulnerable, to the threats of the outside world. In this perspective, the lighthouse itself can even become anthropomorphized in Rumiz's narrative. More precisely, it becomes a voice, similarly to Cassandra's, of/in the Mediterranean, raised once again as a way of revealing its own fragility, while, at the same time, turning it into a denunciation and a call for action. "Il faro, letteralmente, piange. È invaso da un lamento che viene da ovunque e nessun luogo [...], emette una nota baritonale lunga e disturbata da infiniti scricchiolii, simili agli squittii di un topo o alle interferenze di una radio."<sup>103</sup> (Rumiz 114)

Thus, Rumiz's narrative lighthouse is a voice that, significantly, is human, animal, and technological at the same time. If the lighthouse "literally" cries, its human moan is "narratively" disturbed by an indistinct sound that itself reminds of a mouse's squeak and of interferences to radio signals. In the author's own perception, the whole tool is also animal-shaped, and Rumiz finds himself intimidated by what he describes as "un lucertolone di pietra con la sua testa giurassica."<sup>104</sup> (Rumiz 14) The lighthouse, which is presumably the most visible element of the island from afar, has the shape of a big lizard, while, as we have already noted, the lizard is also commonly associated with the center of the island. Then, the reptile's symbolic meaning of resistance and adaptation must be extended to the whole island. Also, Rumiz's narrative lighthouse is, a comprehensive and multi-faceted symbol, human and animal, and also neither of them, at the same time. It is capable of condensing in itself the polyphonic voice of the island, and the whole Mediterranean beyond it, to which it belongs. And it is a voice that,

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<sup>103</sup> "the lighthouse is, literally, crying. It is invaded by a lament coming from everywhere and from nowhere [...], it emits a long, baritone note, disturbed by infinite creaking, similar to a mouse's squeak or to radio interference."

<sup>104</sup> "a big stone lizard with its Jurassic head."



precisely by virtue of being a mix of human, animal, and technological traits, advocates for the possible coexistence, and cooperation, of these different elements within the very space of the Mediterranean.

Finally, as we have already seen in the case of the donkey and the lighthouse keeper, the whole lighthouse itself is both king and prisoner of its Mediterranean island. This condition once again aligns it with the Homeric Cyclops from which Rumiz's narrative takes its name. Polyphemus, in Ulysses' story, is undoubtedly the ruler of his own life on the island, and of the island itself, so powerful not to even be afraid of the Gods. And still, he ends up being fatally entrapped in his own island for the rest of his life, once Ulysses has deprived him of the faculty of sight. It is necessary to note, however, that the lighthouse's destiny, as well as the donkey's, does not have, in Rumiz's narrative, the tragic dimension of Polyphemus' destiny in the Greek narrative. The electric eye of the lighthouse and the only functioning eye of the donkey have not been reduced to blindness, as instead happened to Polyphemus' eye at the end of the Cyclops' unfortunate encounter with Ulysses. The lighthouse, then, and the donkey, within the same narrative dimension of Rumiz's Mediterranean, keep looking ahead with their only eye – where the deviation from the norm becomes a potentiality for an alternative way of seeing – towards a future yet to be written.

What role, then, in Rumiz's narrative, is assigned to the figure of a contemporary Ulysses, who has to find, and negotiate, his own position in relation to the lighthouse/Cyclops, within the very space of the Mediterranean island he temporarily inhabits? Rumiz explicitly draws a parallel between the Greek hero and the lighthouse keeper, at the moment in which the latter arrives on the island in order to take practical and symbolic possession of the tool. “E poi arrivare dal mare non è un arrivare qualunque”, the writer notes. ““Colui che viene” è solo un puntino all’orizzonte, che attendi ma che si materializza in quell’immenso spazio desertico a

un'ora che non sai. In quel grande nulla, la sua apparizione è miracolosa, egli diventa [...]

Ulisse dritto sulla prua della sua nave mentre i compagni vogano nel mare color del vino.”<sup>105</sup>

(Rumiz 95) The writer further suggests the peculiarity of the arrival on an island, where the person who waits is herself on the sea, herself moving “su qualcosa che equivale a una nave.”<sup>106</sup>

(Rumiz 96)

What is, then, the island on which the new Ulysses, whom the lighthouse keeper here personifies, lands? Which one, of the many islands on which Ulysses has to land on his long trip back to Ithaca, is the narrative island of the Greek epos that Rumiz's contemporary narrative reactivates and gives new meaning to? It might well be Ithaca, the ultimate site of return. Then, the lighthouse would be the place to which the keeper ultimately belongs, hence symbolizing again the symbiosis between the man and the tool, and also between land and sea in the space of the island. However, it might also be – and more likely, I believe – the island of the Cyclopes itself, from which the very tool takes its name within the narrative. If this is the case, Rumiz's narrative is suggesting a way out, or at least a move beyond, a humanistic and anthropocentric revisiting of the *Odyssey*. The lighthouse keeper/renewed Ulysses needs to learn how to live with and in the space of the island, constantly renegotiating his own role not in order to deceit the Cyclops, but to find a way to coexist with him. And the Cyclops, while waiting for the arrival of Ulysses, as the islander who waits for someone else's arrival, keeps moving within the movement of the whole island on which he lives. He is not anymore imprisoned in the apparent freedom of his own rule, while being himself open to the possibilities that come from the surrounding world of the sea.

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<sup>105</sup> “Arriving by sea is not an ordinary thing. ‘He who comes’ is only a small dot on the horizon that you are waiting for, but that materializes in that immense desert space you don't know at what time. In that big nothing, his appearance is miraculous, he becomes [...] Ulysses standing on the bow of the ship, while his companions row on the wine-looking sea.”

<sup>106</sup> “on something that is equivalent to a ship.”

However, we need to pay attention to the fact that Rumiz himself has experienced his own arrival to the island from the sea, as the first scene of the book, narrated in the form of a dream, powerfully depicts. Then, the renewed figure of Ulysses that Rumiz's book seems to bring to the forefront might well be the narrator himself, or better the narrative protagonist of Rumiz's own narration. When the character Rumiz confronts himself with the Cyclops in the space of the latter's own island, he must, in order to survive, reformulate his own identity, as Ulysses does with the Cyclops by telling him that his name is "Nobody." However, Rumiz neither lies to the Cyclops/lighthouse that both hosts and frightens him, nor completely renounces his own identity. Rather, he rearticulates his own space within the larger space of the Mediterranean island he travels to. By doing so, Nobody/Rumiz does not earn, as Ulysses does, the sarcastic, and inhospitable gift of being eaten last. He does not inherit the "anthropocentric blindness" which, as Schultz notes, leads Ulysses, "blind to the environment and to the lives of others," to the "savage blinding of Polyphemus." (Schultz 305, 306) On the contrary, Rumiz accepts, and finally embraces, the gift of decentralizing himself from his own real and narrative world.

In Homer's narrative, the way in which Ulysses eventually escapes from the menacing Cyclops is by hiding himself and his companions under the long and thick fur of the ram and the sheep respectively. Then Polyphemus addresses the ram, which for the first time exits the cave last, wishing he could speak and tell him where Ulysses is. But animals, in the Greek narrative, are mute, and they do not seem to take the side of neither of the two contenders. For Ulysses, in particular, animals are pure instruments, used to his advantage. They cover, and hide, the shape of the human, as the *Iliad*'s wooden horse, which hidden the warriors, thus determining the Greek final victory and the parallel destruction of Troy. In the narrative of the dramatic encounter between Ulysses and Polyphemus, the animals allow the Greek heroes to

escape from the cave and to accomplish the Cyclops' final deceit. However, Ulysses' final sacrifice of the ram to Zeus proves useless, so that "it is apparent that the animal is killed unnecessarily, wastefully." (Schultz 306) Within Ulysses' adventures, animals are either fake, simulacra, or mute and passive witnesses of human actions. Rumiz's Ulysses, then, might, on the contrary, point towards a renewed awareness of the human's relationship with the surrounding world, and all that it contains. In the space of his own narrative, Rumiz's character learns how to listen to the multiple voices of the winds and of the animals. Furthermore, he integrates them within the space of his own narrative voice, so that they all ultimately appear as narrative co-agents of this alternative Mediterranean space the writer creates.

How would then Rumiz return from his Mediterranean island, performing his alternative escape from the land of the Cyclopes? What kind of Mediterranean space does his narrative journey intend to map? It is not, as it could appear at first, a circular itinerary, precisely in the same way as Ulysses' journey is only apparently circular. The digressing structure of Rumiz's own physical and narrative journey might be closer to what Edward Said has described as a "circularity of structure, inclusive and open at the same time." (Said 189) At the end of his time on the island, Rumiz does go back to his hometown, Trieste, which has historically been a border town with multiple belongings and is itself a location of a lighthouse. However, within the space of the writer's narrative journey, Trieste does not figure at the beginning, which, as we have seen, starts *in medias res*, when the writer/narrator/character is already on the island. And although Trieste is the place when the narrative ends, it is intended, precisely as Ulysses' Ithaca, only as a temporary stop within a further physical and narrative movement, as the closing sentences of the book make clear: "Avevo voglia di far riposare le mie vecchie ossa, ma non c'era requie. La luce già indicava un'altra meta."<sup>107</sup> (Rumiz 147) The titles of the first and

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<sup>107</sup> "I wanted to rest my old bones, but there was no rest. The light was already pointing to another destination."

the last chapters provide further evidence of the endless, though not linear, movement of Rumiz's narrative journey within and beyond the space of the book, a movement that is enhanced by the narrative itself. The opening chapter of the book is entitled "Giona," as it narrates Rumiz's first entrance into the lighthouse's "belly." Thus, the narrative starts within an enclosed space, which is reassuring and threatening at the same time, leaving both the writer and the reader suspended in the uncertainty of any further movement. However, at the end of an itinerary that narratively connects the space of the island with the whole Mediterranean in which it is located, as well as with other islands and lighthouses of other seas, the last chapter, "Buenos Aires," further opens the Mediterranean narrative to its possible extension beyond the Mediterranean space. Rumiz's Mediterranean journey, in other words, creates a narrative world map in which the Mediterranean is a space whose constant movement opens it to the larger world.

The chapters' titles can also provide a final insight into the meaning of the whole Mediterranean space that Rumiz's narrative intends to create. In order to better address their specific significance within the whole narrative project, these titles can be usefully grouped into a few larger categories. The first one comprises titles that refer to natural elements: winds ("tramontana" and "borea,")<sup>108</sup> storms (the ancient Mediterranean word "nevera,") fire ("folgore,")<sup>109</sup> and constellations ("monile.") If those just mentioned all relate to the two elements of air and fire, earth and water also constitute a fundamental dimension of Rumiz's narrative, insofar as the island itself is a small portion of land "floating" on the sea. Other titles, then, refer to locations and places that are characteristic of these two latter elements, either in the Mediterranean space (such as "precipizio," "arcipelaghi," "Adriatico,")<sup>110</sup> or beyond that (as

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<sup>108</sup> "Tramontane" and "Bora"

<sup>109</sup> "lightning"

<sup>110</sup> "precipice," "archipelago," "Adriatic."

“banchisa,”<sup>111</sup> characteristic of the northern sea), while the title “cambusa”<sup>112</sup> also points towards the interpretation of the island as a ship, hence as endless movement.

Two titles specifically address the apparent juxtaposition, in the space of the island, between darkness and light, where the former is the night (“notte”) of Rumiz’s first arrival, or rather the “dream version” of such an arrival. Light is, on the contrary, the lighthouse itself, the Cyclops’ eye (“lampada.”) However, as we have already noted when discussing the meaning of the lighthouse/Cyclops, light and darkness within Rumiz’s Mediterranean space are not necessarily in contradiction. The lighthouse, as a renewed Cyclops and a “fragile candela persanelle tenebre,”<sup>113</sup> (Rumiz 113) condenses in itself sight and blindness, vulnerability and strength, hope and fear, openness and closeness.

Various titles take their names from different animals. The donkey (“asino,”) fits in this category, as a real and metaphorical figure of resistance and endurance, and also significantly associated with both the lighthouse/Cyclops and Rumiz’s own character. “Iguana,” symbolic figure of adaptation and change, stands for, and gives the shape to the island itself, while the whale gives the title (“balene”) to a chapter devoted to the other sea that is the Ocean. An Ocean that, in spite of the writer’s own reservations and Glissant’s interpretation, is not necessarily opposite to the Mediterranean that the narrative performs. Finally, “la mantide”<sup>114</sup> stands once again for the lighthouse itself, but it is also a kind of legendary mix of human and animal, as its eye is very similar to a human’s eye. The peculiar connotation of the mantis’ eye further suggests how the lighthouse/Cyclops in Rumiz’s narrative indicates an alternative way of looking at things. At the same time, the etymological derivation of the mantis’ name from Greek “*mantis*,” which literally means “prophet,” creates a significant point of contact with the

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<sup>111</sup> “icepack”

<sup>112</sup> “galley”

<sup>113</sup> “fragile candle lost in the darkness”

<sup>114</sup> “the mantis”

prophetess Cassandra, who gives the title to the book's chapter that addresses the question of narrative.

"Cassandra" is one of the few titles of the whole book that refers to human figures. In this further category, the title "sentinelle"<sup>115</sup> is again just another name for the lighthouses, which are constantly alert of what happens in the surrounding sea they are exposed to. "Naufraghi,"<sup>116</sup> although specifically referred, within the story, to two men from the Czech Republic who are rescued on the island during a night storm, also inevitably resonates with the condition of the narrator himself, castaway on this Mediterranean island. The last human-related title is "Onca," which is actually a proper name, the name of "l'ultima inquilina della Lanterna, il faro più vecchio di Trieste,"<sup>117</sup> (Rumiz 136) whose life was all "consumed" in the Mediterranean. Significantly, even though this lighthouse is not functioning anymore, Rumiz can still "see" Onca and hear her voice. It is as if neither the sea nor the lighthouses within it can be totally silenced, as Onca is, in Rumiz's narrative, pure voice rose to preserve a memory of the past and to point towards the future. Lighthouse can be noble "rovine," but they are not mute "ruderi," as they retain a dynamic dimension, against the apparently static condition in which they are relegated by a fast modernity. The memory about Onca comes to Rumiz's mind by observing Maria, the new and current "queen" of the Mediterranean lighthouse at the time in which he is about to leave the island. Onca, and the lighthouse in Trieste she has identified with for her whole existence, comes back to life in this other female figure, who is herself, in Rumiz's narrative, a personification of the resistance of the Mediterranean lighthouse he has visited. Thus, humans, in Rumiz's chapters, seem to all get their meaning from something that

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<sup>115</sup> "sentinels"

<sup>116</sup> "castaways"

<sup>117</sup> "the last tenant of the Lantern, the oldest lighthouse in Trieste"

goes beyond them, a faculty (Cassandra), a condition (of the castaway), or the lighthouse itself (sentinelle and Onca).

Four last chapters' titles can be also grouped together as they all point towards the multi-sensorial character of Rumiz's narrative. To this last category belongs "l'urlo,"<sup>118</sup> which specifically refers to the scream of the seagulls on the island, and addresses the voiced dimension of the island itself. "Visione"<sup>119</sup> refers to Rumiz's pelagic perception of the Mediterranean, which however, as we have seen, involves different senses and indicates an alternative way of seeing. "Muggito,"<sup>120</sup> a sound which usually pertains to the animal realm, here rather refers to the "voice" of the wind, whose significance in the whole narrative we have highlighted. Finally, "profumo di assenzio,"<sup>121</sup> which is the fragrance that tramontane carries with it on Rumiz's last evening on the island, adds to Rumiz's Mediterranean space the sensorial dimension of smell, which further decentralizes a normative predominance of the visual register.<sup>122</sup>

The analysis of the chapters' titles reassesses Rumiz's narrative Mediterranean as a composite space, polyphonic and multi-sensorial, whose elements are tightly interconnected with each other, and whose multiple voices endlessly struggle to be heard, and to resist the loss of meaning that threatens them. In this context, the human is only a small part of a whole that constantly moves and renegotiates its own position within the global world. It does not matter, in the end, if the narrative is only an imperfect representation of the actual geospace of the Mediterranean. What does matter is that this narrative can be useful to revise one's own way of seeing and interpreting the space itself, allowing for what Tally calls an "exercise of literary

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<sup>118</sup> "the scream"

<sup>119</sup> "vision"

<sup>120</sup> "mooing"

<sup>121</sup> "smell of absinthe"

<sup>122</sup> On the increasing significance and eventual domination of the visual register (over those of the other senses) with the development of capitalist mode of production see Lefebvre 1991.



geography.” (Tally 85) Thus, in the space of the Mediterranean that Rumiz imagines and narrates, the human can also potentially find alternative ways to renegotiate his own life, in order to better coexist with his natural and animal surroundings, in a constant movement of reciprocal adaptation. If so, Rumiz’s alternative Mediterranean can also suggest alternative ways of looking at the world at large, insofar as, following Tally’s geocritical approach, we believe that “the reader of narrative maps draws upon frames of reference to help make sense of both the text, the space it represents, and the world.” (Tally 85)

## **II. A Video Narrative**

### **Zineb Sedira’s Artistic Mediterranean**

*Un regard sur la mer,  
c’est un regard sur le possible.*  
Paul Valéry, *Inspirations Méditerranéennes*

I devote the last section of the present chapter to introducing and analyzing some works by the French Algerian artist Zineb Sedira, which can be usefully interpreted in the light of the above reading of Rumiz’s *Il Ciclope*. My analysis focuses, in particular, on Sedira’s acclaimed video installation trilogy –, which comprises *Saphir* (2006), *Middle Sea* (2008), and *Floating Coffins* (2009) – that explores the Mediterranean Sea as an interstitial site of contradictions and possibilities. Furthermore, I draw a parallel between Rumiz’s Cyclops/lighthouse and one of Sedira’s more recent video installations, *Lighthouse in the Sea of Time* (2011), which also centers on the Mediterranean lighthouse. As in the previous chapter, my intention is here to create a link between two different, but also complementary, Mediterranean narratives, moving

again from the Italian shore to the North African one, or, rather, again back and forth from one to the other, in the in-between space that these very narratives create.

In chapter one, I built a parallel between Lina Prosa's *Lampedusa Beach* and Razan Moghrabi's *Women of the Wind*, as the two works, coming from two different, and opposite, shores of the Mediterranean, manage to counteract and complicate a dominant and simplistic narrative of Mediterranean migration. Although Prosa's play is not technically a "narrative" work, conceived and produced as a dramatic performance, I pointed out how the narrative dimension of the play prevails over its dramatic aspects, so that I could look at both the play and the novel through the category of narrative. In the present chapter, I aim to show how some of Sedira's works, which revolve around a peculiar interaction of land and sea in the visual space of the Mediterranean, resonate in a particular way with specific aspects of Paolo Rumiz's narrative island. Thus, here I apply the category of narrative not only, as in the previous case, to different literary genres, but also to different media of cultural expression. Sedira's artwork does rely upon a particular condition of "narrativity." The artist's own trajectory from photography to video art testifies to a specific direction in the development of her own artistic language. The passage from the still images of her photographic works to the movement of the video form involves the progressive embrace of an enhanced narrative dimension, though her narrative remains non-linear and fragmented. When looked at and interpreted in relation to one another, and also within the context in which they are produced and shown, Sedira's video installations can offer a narrative experience – parallel and contemporary to Rumiz's – of the relationship, and possible coexistence, of land and sea, immobility and movement, tradition and modernity, local and global, human and non-human, both within and beyond the space of the Mediterranean that these works belong to.

### From Rumiz to Sedira across the Mediterranean

Both Rumiz's and Sedira's narratives emerge from borderline zones of the larger Mediterranean space they belong and refer to. Paolo Rumiz, tireless traveler and reporter of his own journeys across the globe, comes from – and returns to at the end of his Mediterranean physical and narrative journey – the border town of Trieste. Not only is Trieste positioned at the very northern edge of the Adriatic, one of the many seas in which the Mediterranean gets articulated and fragmented,<sup>123</sup> but it also lies at the physical and cultural margins of the Italian peninsula, where Italian identity itself has long been contested and unstable. The peripheral location of Rumiz's point of departure plays a role in the "peripheral centrality" he strives to assign to his Mediterranean island. Regardless of its real geographical location, which is erased from the narrative on purpose, the island can be imagined as being at the same time margin and center, insofar as the very opposition between the two gets nullified in the narrative space itself.

Zineb Sedira's origins are located both in the opposite shore of the Mediterranean, as she was born to Algerian parents, and in Northern Europe, as she was born and raised in Paris. Neither a pied-noir nor an Algerian born in Algeria, the artist lives and experiences the Mediterranean world that is at the core of her work from a position that is in-between two spaces and two cultures, the Algerian and the French, whose relationship has been so critically shaped by colonialism.<sup>124</sup> These two cultures, in Sedira's own identitarian relation to them, constantly strive to come to terms with each other, as they keep interacting and pointing towards each other within the larger Mediterranean space her visual work revolves around.

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<sup>123</sup> A "sea of intimacy," in Matvejevic formulation, the Adriatic has long been, within the larger Mediterranean, a contested space, a bridge and a wall at the same time. See, for instance, Ballinger, Pamela. *Liquid Borderland. Inelastic Sea* 2013.

<sup>124</sup> In an interview with the art writer Coline Millard in 2011, Sedira points out that she is one of the few Algerian artists, both in Algeria and in France, to deal with the memory of the Algerian War of Independence. "Transmitting memory and silence" is at the core of Sedira's early works, as pointed out in Hubbell, Amy L., and Nossery N. El. *The Unspeakable* 2013. For the different implications of the complex relations between the two countries before, during, and after colonialism, see also Lorcín, Patricia M. E. *Algeria & France* 2006.

At the same time, the French and the Algerian are only two of the multiple influences that constitute the artist's whole geographical, historical, and cultural framework, within, and beyond, the Mediterranean. The condition of migration and displacement has largely informed her whole life, as she studied, mostly works, and lives in London. Moreover, Sedira's own artistic work is both shaped by and itself shapes a complex and multidirectional itinerary. She has held exhibitions in many European, North American, and North African locations, and it is only in some parts of France that she has sometimes faced a controversial reception, due to the delicate position, in the French national memory, of the issues she addresses.<sup>125</sup> At the same time, Sedira aims to support the development of the local art scene in Algeria, where she founded *aria*, an artist residency in Algiers, which promotes "international cross-cultural exchanges and collaborations."<sup>126</sup>

In other words, Sedira's work is undoubtedly shaped by the complex interaction, both in terms of real historical background and from the point of view of a collective imaginary, between France and Algeria. However, not only does she embrace the two cultures from an "anti anti-essentialist" position, in Gilroy's terms (102) – as her French and Algerian belongings never appear as mutually exclusive in her artistic work, – but also she is interested in experiencing and exploring them within the larger Mediterranean context they are part of. Thus, the artist's early focus on the question of identity related to her own postcolonial double belonging translates later into a broader interest in the multiple and multi-directional global routes of contemporary Mediterranean crossings. In the video installations of the past ten years, Sedira's visual landscape significantly opens towards the whole Mediterranean space, in which

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<sup>125</sup> In 2010, her exhibition at the Musée Picasso in Vallauris, in the south of France, was closed down because she used the word *collaborateur* (which in French is associated with the people who sided with the Germans during the Second World War) to translate *Harki* (which designates the Algerians who sided with the French during the Independence War) in the subtitles of her piece *Retelling Histories, my mother told me* (2003). And even after she agreed to replace *collaborateur* with *Harki*, the show remained closed for a long while.

<sup>126</sup> <http://www.zinebsedira.com/sites/default/files/Z.S%20BIO.pdf>

routes of migration and displacement constantly interlace, and it ends up reaching even further, looking at the larger world beyond the Mediterranean.

Sedira's works I refer to here do not share Rumiz's point of departure and main focus of his *Il Ciclope*. The artist's focus is not an island at the supposed center of the Mediterranean, but rather it is the very movement on and across the Mediterranean Sea and its opposite shores. However, not only do Rumiz's and Sedira's different narratives nevertheless converge in the very conception of the Mediterranean they ultimately aim to suggest, but both the writer and the artist seem to have a particular fascination with the real and symbolic figure of the lighthouse, whose potential meaning they both address, and give a central role, in their work.

As I already noted, Rumiz's and Sedira's work come from two different geopolitical locations, and use different means of expression and representation. However, framed together within the very space of the Mediterranean which lies at the core of their inspiration, Rumiz's literary narration of his physical and imaginary journey to the Mediterranean island and Sedira's artistic narrative of any possible journey across the Mediterranean Sea significantly complement, or rather resonate with, each other. We have already seen how Rumiz's personal and solitary journey ends up delineating a potentially universal itinerary across the whole Mediterranean and even beyond it, where his own un-localized island can ultimately be identified with any other island. In the same way, as Sedira notes on her own personal statement, her artistic interest "gradually shifted from autobiographical concerns to more universal ideas of mobility, memory, and transmission."<sup>127</sup> Parallel to the development of her own artistic language from photography to video art, Sedira's art witnesses a further development from the individuality of what she herself calls a "singular personal geography" to a form of universalism. In a conversation with the art curator Christine Van Assche about her

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<sup>127</sup> <http://www.zinebsedira.com/sites/default/files/Z.Sedira%20Statement.pdf>

work *Saphir*, the artist states that she wants “the video to be poetic and full of imagery, so that it could be read in an open, universal way.” (Sedira 61) The artist’s whole trajectory designs a journey that, while remaining connected to personal experience, still manages to transcend the individual, hence moving beyond the French and Algerian shores of the Mediterranean she belongs to. In Laclau’s terms, her “subject position” is, and wants to be, “a special location within a totality” that both encloses and defines it. As “the universal emerges out of the particular not as some principle underlying and explaining it, but as an incomplete horizon suturing a dislocated particular identity,” (Laclau 89) Sedira’s particular French and Algerian identity gains a new dimension when re-interpreted within the larger Mediterranean, and global, context it constantly relates to.

Through the peculiar attention devoted to both human and non-human voices, to the infinite stories in and about the Mediterranean as well as to the sounds of animals, winds and waves, Rumiz’s narrative island leads to a recovery of the polyphonic voice of the Mediterranean. It is a voice that is inherently fragmented, composite, and ultimately impossible to be reduced to a single root. Similarly, the French Algerian artist progressively develops what she calls a “polyphonic vocabulary,” through which the many different voices of the Mediterranean can come together and be heard in their interaction with each other. It is not by chance that the human figure, in Sedira’s works, always negotiates its own position within a landscape that is never, and gradually less of, a backdrop, as both visual and auditory devices keep reminding the audience.

The temporal dimension of the past, which is, however, always actualized in the immediacy of the present and oriented towards the future, is as significant in Sedira’s Mediterranean as it is in Rumiz’s island narrative. Moreover, in the artist’s own conception, “preserving and transmitting memories of the past” is never an end in itself, but always the

means to “leave a legacy for the future,”<sup>128</sup> by opening up further possibilities and trajectories. Thus, the dimension of denunciation, to which the re-actualized figure of Cassandra and the donkey/Cyclops give such a powerful voice in Rumiz’s narrative, also becomes more and more urgent in Sedira’s work. As in Rumiz’s *Il Ciclope*, remembering the past and denouncing the present are the only and necessary means to enact hope and resistance, the ultimate dimensions of a narrative Mediterranean in the present and for the future.

### Framing the Sea

Sedira’s Mediterranean artwork creates a narrative in which the dimension of seeing, the visual perception of both the artist and the audience, is inherently and immediately predominant. The alternative way of seeing and picturing the Mediterranean, which Rumiz suggested through his visionary new Cassandra and his single-eyed donkey/Cyclops, is actualized in the visual means of Sedira’s art, which has mostly alternated between photography and video installations. As I said, the recent prevalence of videos over photographs is already significant in itself, as the narrative movement of the former replaces the still images of the latter. Sedira’s video installations delineate non-linear, fragmented, and rhizomatic narrative paths that the simultaneous movement of different images on various screens creates. Thus, the digressive, multifocal, and polyphonic structure of Rumiz’s literary narrative translates into the polyphonic “relativistic simultaneity” of Sedira’s artistic narrative. As Christine Ross notes in her study of video-art simultaneity, multi-screen video installations – Sedira’s favorite form – “abolish the privileging of any event over the other, of any frame of reference over the other, of any tense over the other.” (Ross 212) Often, the videos alternately fade in and out, while showing the same shot at different focal lengths, so as to offer different, alternative, while always-unstable

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<sup>128</sup> <http://www.zinebsedira.com/sites/default/files/Z.Sedira%20Statement.pdf>

perspectives on the same focus. In other words, the artist faces Rumiz's same challenge to represent the complexity of a Mediterranean condition that is irreducible to unity and impossible to trace back to Glissant's supposed single root of the Mediterranean itself. Thus, the discontinuities and the multivocality of video art, where plurality is an "immanent situation," (Hedlin Hayden 183) seem to be better able to respond to this constantly diffracting and diffracted Mediterranean condition. The "compositional technique of multiple projection screens whose spatial alignment replaces the diegetic frame" (Frohne 369) can only allow the emergence of a narrative that proceeds through juxtaposition and diffraction.

As I mentioned before, Sedira's first works intended to address and to come to terms with the issue of her own identity, split between France and Algeria. One of her first acclaimed works, *Mother Tongue*, from 2002, deploys a post-colonial and identitarian narrative, which reflects the artist's autobiographical interest in people's displacement, as experienced by her parents who emigrated into France. However, I will rather focus on some of her later works, not so much concerned anymore with her own personal history, but rather with creating a fictional narrative, in which the space of the Mediterranean is the undisputable protagonist. It is the Mediterranean Sea that, in the words of the art curator Lisa Le Feuvre, who commented on Sedira's 2009 exhibition at the Pori Art Museum in Finland, "operates as a screen on to which the imagination is projected," as its "unrepresentability paradoxically draws in the unlimited possibilities of the imagination as a defining quality." (Le Feuvre 41) The whole of Sedira's most recent work can be seen as an attempt to visualize a Mediterranean Sea that is, and has to be, at the same time a real space and an imaginary one, where attention to concrete details does not diminish openness to infinite possibilities beyond the real.

The narrative that Sedira creates in her latest video installations does inherit some of the intuitions of her photographic works, or, better, it implements the potentiality of the visual



means that she already explored for the realization of her art-photography. Moreover, it is through the photographic camera lens that the sea first imposes its overwhelming presence within Sedira's larger artistic landscape, so that a brief mention of three of these photographic works can be useful here. In her *Framing the View*, from 2006, which the curator and art critic Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche defines as a "plastic contemporary writing that combines sensitivity with an intellectual approach," (Laggoune-Aklouche 73) the pictures portray a sea that constantly strives to gain its proper space within the frame of the camera.<sup>129</sup> The sea never fails to capture the eye of the spectator, relying on her "sensitivity" and enhancing her imagination. At the same time, however, various obstacles impede and "intellectually" disturb this very view of the sea.

Once again, shipwreck is the only experience that can lead to the overcoming of the obstacles. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Leopardi's hedge, which at the same time obstructed his view and enhanced his own imaginary journey on the sea beyond it, re-actualizes, in Prosa's play, in the obstacles that threaten Shauba's dream of migration. If the utilitarian insensitivity of the human traffickers and the inappropriateness of the migrants' boat ultimately determine Shauba's physical drowning, these obstacles are not, however, able to prevent her imaginary landing on the island of Lampedusa. The narrative power of her never-ending shipwreck resists intact the threats of her physical annihilation.

In a similar way, Sedira's photographs of *Framing the View* require the viewer's extra effort of imagination, if she wants to be able to picture the extended space of a sea that seems to always lie behind other objects on the foreground of the image. These obstacles, which materialize in the space between the viewer and the sea, are either buildings or parts of buildings informed by an evident bad state of disrepair. They are ruins, but in Rumiz's

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<sup>129</sup> For a look at the photographs, see <http://www.zinebsedira.com/?q=photography/framing-view-2006>.

conception of the word, insofar as they seem to bring forward their own force of resistance to annihilation and oblivion. In Marc Augé's words, "the sight of the ruins allow us to grasp the existence of a time," (Augé 6) the inexorable passage of a time whose traces cannot be dissolved. Thus, the ruins in Sedira's photographs testify to a dimension of resistance that flows from the past into the present, and towards the future. In the frame of the artist's photographic camera, the ruins come together and "share the view" with the sea that keeps resurfacing along or behind them, so as to further enhance the ruins' own act of resistance. In the photographs, the Mediterranean Sea never stops washing the shore where the ruined buildings lie, or appears behind a high wall, turns up below a terrace, or even reclaims its own space within the holes of a wall that, once again, both cover and allow for the view of the sea. Thus, the photographs suggest a delicate – while also always unstable and often imbalanced – encounter between the fluid sea and the solid world around it. And this encounter ultimately points towards the necessity of a reciprocal permeability between the sea and the land that surrounds it, beyond the constrained framework of the photographic image, in the much larger space of the whole Mediterranean.

The two later photographic projects of *Another Sight* and *A View to Sea*, from 2008, feature again the sea as the central element of the images, although this time it is shot from a boat that navigates on the sea itself. In both works, the boat seems to have a similar function to the ruins of *Framing the View*, insofar as the solid materiality of the boat's parts, which are often put into the foreground, coexists and interacts, in the enclosed frame of the picture, with the fluidity of the sea around them. However, the implicit movement of the boat on the sea here replaces the visual immobility of the ruins in the previous work, so that movement again affirms itself as a fundamental dimension of the Mediterranean space. As we have already seen, in Rumiz's book the space of the island is experienced and narrated through its own movement,

which participates in the larger movement of the sea to which it belongs. Conceived in this way, Rumiz's narrative island could become Foucault's heterotopic ship, a "floating piece of space" (Foucault 27) in the Mediterranean space of the sea. Sedira's photographs, despite the stillness of their images, are nevertheless able to capture the movement of the sea as "narrated" from the moving space of the boat, so that both appear to move at the same time, involved in a reciprocal process of becoming.

Beside the two moving elements of the sea and the boat that interact with each other in all the images of these two works, a third element seems also to be somehow implied, or at least suggested, in some of the photographs that constitute the works. In one of the pictures from *Another Sight*, the sea is double-framed, as the photo is taken from behind a window inside a boat cabin. The window is itself visible in the picture, and a small bench with two cushions on it appears right behind it. The viewer is here inevitably inclined to imagine, or at least wonder about, the presence of human beings, who seem tangible precisely in their visual absence. Someone needs to be sitting on those two cushions of the bench, as a person's eye is so clearly responsible here for the framing of the view.<sup>130</sup>

Even more explicitly, the central photograph of the first triptych from *A View to Sea* shows an empty chair on the deck of a boat that navigates on the open sea. Here, the question of the human perspective within and/or outside of the picture becomes also more complex, as the chair faces the camera, its back turned on the sea. As all the titles of the works we have seen so far make clear, the dimension of the visual, and even more specifically the question of a point of view, of a perspective on the sea itself, is undoubtedly central. Who is here looking at what,

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<sup>130</sup> The main photographs from *Another Sight* can be seen here: <http://www.zinebsedira.com/?q=photography/another-sight-2008>; and here is the link to *A View to Sea*: <http://www.zinebsedira.com/?q=photography/view-sea-2008>. Sedira's narrative strategy here can be seen as a visual example of what the Australian narratologist Stanzel described as "perspectivism," namely a particular representation of space that "encourages the reader's illusion of being directly and vividly presented with fictional reality." (Stanzel 123). In other words, here the audience is very easily inclined to attribute the perspective to a human being located on the same site, right outside of the frame.

as the position of the empty chair would not in any case allow for a view of the open sea? What are the space and the role of the human, absent and yet somehow so present? Sedira's latest photographic works leave the audience puzzled by these interrogatives, which cannot possibly be resolved in the constrained space of the pictures. However, later works provide interesting insights into these same questions, so as to lead us towards tentative answers.

### A Trilogy of the Sea: the Centrality of a Decentralized Mediterranean

Between 2006 and 2009, Sedira worked on three distinct video installations intended to finally become the three interrelated parts of a trilogy, *Saphir*, *Middle Sea*, and *Floating Coffins*.<sup>131</sup> In this extensive work, the sea is not only the connecting element, but also the constant object, or, rather, the subject of the artistic gaze. In his essay on Sedira's 2011 solo-exhibition in Paris, *Beneath the Surface*, in which the whole trilogy was shown, Steven Bode, director of the London artist-agency Film and Video Umbrella, notes: "Running through each work, like a leitmotif, and source of inspiration, is a preoccupation with the presence of the sea, [which] not only acts as an epic backdrop, but also functions as a widescreen canvas for her [Sedira's] ideas." (Bode 31) In a much more pronounced way than in the photographic projects I have just introduced, in this trilogy the sea itself dictates the visual and narrative movement of the videos, where the shots seem often to follow and adjust to the pace and rhythm of the sea waves.

Movement in the Mediterranean, which already became a significant dimension of Sedira's latest photography, plays its role here at multiple, and interconnected, levels, both within and outside the space of the artwork. Within the single works, there is the constant movement of the sea shot by the artist's camera, as well as the movement of the camera itself. Moreover, each of the videos develops through its own narrative, which, as the artist reveals, is

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<sup>131</sup> Still images of Sedira's video installations can be found here: <http://www.zinebsedira.com/?q=video>.

not determined in advance, but rather happens at the very time of giving form to the video itself. In other words, Sedira does not work from a predefined screenplay, while she films very long sequences, and only determines the final narrative in the process of editing. Thus, the artist's strategic arrangement of various scenes and shot cuts nevertheless creates the illusion of a fluid and continuous movement of the cinematic narrative, which often visualizes further in the constant movement of the sea within the video.

However, the physical set-up of the work as an art installation challenges this cinematic illusion, while also further contributing to the dimension of movement of the work itself. In the space of the exhibition, two of the three works of the trilogy are realized as synchronic projections on different walls. As Alexander Alberro points out, asserting the necessity, when interpreting video art, to “consider the relationship between viewing practices and the construction of meaning,” (Alberro 426) within the space of the exhibition “the installation makes no attempt to efface the physical context,” creating a “disjointed effect.” (Alberro 425) As the viewer is required to take a journey within the space of the exhibition, where both his eyes and his whole body constantly move from one video to the other, any linear perspective on the images projected on the various screens is subject to continuous changes.<sup>132</sup> As Christine Ross explains in relation to Bill Viola's video art, these kinds of video installations “problematize the opticality of the image,” as they aim to change, in Viola's own words, the “habit of viewing objects as we see them.” (Ross 84) Sedira's own multi-screen installations, in other words, keep challenging and ultimately disrupting any possibility of a uniqueness of vision, creating, on the contrary, a sort of “counter-panopticon”, where “the panopticon organized its absolute visibility around a dominating, overseeing gaze that issued from a central point.” (Renov and Suderburg xiii-xiv) At the same time, as Ursula Frohne explains, in the

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<sup>132</sup> On the incompatibility of optics and perspective, and on the deceitful nature of a linear perspective that promotes a unified, and actually impossible, homogenous spatiality, see Panofsky 1927.

space of the exhibition the viewer moves from a condition of “optical reception” to one of “responsibility,” (Frohne 360) since, in the impossibility to focus simultaneously on the different screens, “it is he or she who decides on the order of the cuts or montage,” (Alberro 427) giving the work its (un)finished narrative.

In the framework of the whole trilogy and of its content, there is also a gradual transition from stasis to movement, where the sea as one, though central, element of the picture becomes the sea as a means of movement. Moreover, with regard to the overall meaning of the trilogy, the videos move towards a progressive decentralization of the human figure in favor of the overwhelming centrality of the sea itself. Significantly, the ultimate gesture in *Floating Coffins* of decentralizing the very Mediterranean in face of global eco-critical issues leads to the visual narrative of a kind of shipwreck. This time, however, the shipwreck moves beyond the Mediterranean, in the wider space of the Atlantic, and there are no human castaways left, but only adrift material objects.

The titles of the three works also suggest a movement, both within the space of the trilogy and in relation to the outside world they refer to, from stillness to movement itself, from enclosure to openness, from local to global. *Saphir*, the title of the first work, means “ambassador” in Arabic and is also the name of the hotel in the port of Algiers that appears in the videos. Even though, then, the work seems at first to assert its own link to the Arab roots of Algeria – in the language as well as in the location – the hotel is a place that, by definition, opens to the outside, a place for “non-belongers,” one of Marc Augé’s “non-places” precisely because it is a space of transit, itself characterized by movement. Similarly, the ambassador is somehow a figure of estrangement, displaced to live in a country that is foreign to him. Thus, the Mediterranean Sea that figures in the space of *Saphir* is already loaded with the imaginary

of all the shores towards which it opens, and ready to fulfill a need for further movement and interaction.

*Middle Sea* refers precisely to this further dimension, to the sea when it becomes the means of a passage, the space of a journey. In an interview at the time of the exhibition of the trilogy in Paris, Sedira addresses explicitly the development from the first to the second work. Whereas *Saphir* is more concerned with the dimension of return of the French and Algerian emigrants to France – as in the personal history of the artist’s own family – the visual narrative in *Middle Sea* relies upon an intentional ambiguity between Marseilles and Algiers, exploring the issue of mobility rather than just the question of migration.<sup>133</sup> As in Prosa’s play, in other words, the accent here is on the movement within the in-between space of the sea, rather than on either the landing or the departing site. It is also interesting that the Mediterranean Sea is referred to here with a literal translation of its Arabic name. The Arabic expression used to designate the Mediterranean Sea, “al bahr al abyad al mutawassit,” contrary to the Latin word “medi-terraneus,” contains in itself the word “sea,” and not the word “land.” It is the sea that does not only allow, but also enhances movement, and imposes its own rhythm on the space it inhabits, and on the land that surrounds it.

In the last work of the trilogy, movement is the repetitive, oscillatory, and paradoxically static movement of “floating” boats on the wider space of the Ocean, beyond the Mediterranean, along the coast of Mauritania. Human movement cannot be here either envisioned, as in *Saphir*, or actually experienced, as in *Middle Sea*, but is rather completely erased from the narrative, as the boats are only “coffins,” rusty ruins of the past. However, the apparently negative involution of the trilogy, which the title itself suggests through the image of abandoned and quasi-immobile sarcophagi, can perhaps be reversed, as denunciation does not

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<sup>133</sup> See Bode, Milliard, and Verhagen 2011.

have to lead necessarily to inaction and despair. A “floating coffin” might be awaiting right outside of the Mediterranean, but this does not mean that there is no space for rejecting the threats of death from within the Mediterranean itself, as a closer look at *Floating Coffins* will reveal.

The installation *Saphir* is shown on two different projections that focus on a man and a woman respectively, where the former walks in the outside area of the port of Algiers, while the latter stays in the enclosed space of a hotel on the same area. The port and the hotel, as well as the man and the woman within them, look towards the sea, and towards France beyond it. This first work of the trilogy is undoubtedly the more localized of the three, as the whole video takes place in the very recognizable space of Algiers. However, here Sedira is already trying to point to the necessary overcoming of the barrier that the sea itself seems to, or at least might, impose, with, in the case of the woman, the additional layer that the building provides her with. It is a barrier between the artist’s two cultures of origin, which linguistically interact in the space of the video, where a glimpse of the Arabic name of the hotel coexists with the transliterated Arabic name of a boat, which, in turn, reads next to the French sign “*Algerie Ferries*.” It is, more widely, the possible barrier between all the different Mediterranean spaces, whose cultures spread on the seashores. But it is also, finally, a barrier between the human – and the land on which she rests – and the sea itself.

The whole installation relies mostly on the visual means. The sounds of sea waves and birds open and close the work, but otherwise the soundscape is very minimal, where only distant voices and noises are not supposed to distract the viewer from the images. First, a balustrade appears on one screen, followed immediately by the single eye of a man on the other screen. The balustrade materializes the obsessive presence, in all of Sedira’s works we have seen so far, of the obstacle that links and separates at the same time, that impedes and allows for



both seeing and moving beyond it. As the art critic Richard Dyer notes, the repeated shots of the hotel's windows work in the same direction, showing the (im)possible concurrence of enclosure and openness. As in the photographs of *Another Sight*, here too, when the video is shot from inside the hotel, then the sea appears beyond the window, so as to permeate the building, becoming somehow part of it. In this way, the material obstacle does not obtrude anymore, but rather coexists with the fluid sea that flows beyond it.

In this ideological framework, the human presence, which we had difficulty in contextualizing within the photographic works previously addressed, seems to disclose its proper role. The close-up on a single eye of the man (as it appears on the second screen right after the balustrade on the first one) suggests that the human being can be here interpreted as a re-proposition of Rumiz's Cyclops. The apparently defective, but truly alternative way of looking at things can, and must be the means to overcome the barriers imposed between the man and the sea, thus allowing him to reach and connect with the other lands beyond the sea.

Although they do not leave the space of Algiers, both the man and the woman, on their respective screens, move within the space assigned to them. They move both horizontally, on the pier and inside of the hotel room respectively, and vertically, up and down the stairs in the area of the port or within the hotel building. As Dyer again suggests, "there is a dynamic set up between the notion of arrival and departure, stasis and transition, entrapment and escape, belonging and not belonging," (Dyer 9) while movement is also suggested through formal devices, with the use of fade-ins and outs, and in the juxtaposition of still images on one screen with moving shot on the other.

*Middle Sea* seems to start where *Saphir* ends, actualizing the potentiality of movement on the Mediterranean Sea that the previous work suggested as attainable, and desirable. However, the human presence is reduced to just one person, the same male figure from *Saphir*,

who has presumably left the port and is now on a boat towards Marseilles.<sup>134</sup> According to Laggoune-Aklouche, in *Saphir* “the hero is the individual, locked in the drama of the indecision, uncertainty and incommunicability of the human condition. The figures move without meeting, departure seems impractical and the journey impossible.” (Laggoune-Aklouche 72) In *Middle Sea*, on the contrary, the artist would shift “to an almost abstract visual idiom,” in which “the representation of the sea is no longer incidental (as in *Saphir*), it is dominant.” (Laggoune-Aklouche 76) Where the critic sees almost a fracture between the two works, I see more of a continuity and a smooth development, as I have already noted how the premises on which *Middle Sea* relies are all set in the previous installation.

I must agree that *Middle Sea* is the least fragmented, and most affirmative, of the three works. It is not a coincidence that this is the only work within the trilogy to be projected on a single screen, so that the formal arrangement of the installation itself seems already to suggest a less fragmented, and possibly more homogenous, kind of narrative. After the uncertainty of *Saphir*, the visual narrative here resolves into the real experience of the journey, finally embracing openness and the dimension of leaving. However, *Saphir*’s uncertainty is not necessarily dramatic, but it rather creates a suspended narrative that requires, and prepares for, further unfolding. Moreover, while the focus on the sea, and the more sporadic human presence, could be seen as leading *Middle Sea* towards abstraction, the visual and auditory narrative of the sea in the work focuses rather on its distinct material qualities. Compared to *Saphir*, the sea appears here much closer on the screen, looked at from the boat that moves on it. The sea here is not a distant light blue expanse of water, as in the most common imaginary, but is rather

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<sup>134</sup> It would be interesting, and would possibly provide important insights into her whole work, to discuss the reasons why Sedira chooses to eliminate the female protagonist of *Saphir* from the other two works of the trilogy, and reflect upon the meaning and implications of such a choice. However, I believe that such a discussion would lead me far away from my main concern here, which is analyzing Sedira’s work from the point of view of the interaction of land and sea in the space of the Mediterranean she proposes, as it is also the aspect that mostly resonates with Rumiz’s work. For this reason, I will not comment on the gender issue that emerges from the trilogy.

repeatedly shot in the mix of dark and white of the sea foam produced by the very movement of the boat. The soundtrack of the installation is also much more insistent and difficult to go unnoticed, as it consists mostly in the noise of breaking waves against the boat itself. In other words, here Sedira is not trying to convey a symbolic, and idyllic image of the sea; on the contrary, she seems to be more interested in its material fluidity.

Not only does the movement of the sea, which in *Saphir* accompanied only from a distance that of the man and the woman on the land, reach the foreground in *Middle Sea*, but it also articulates itself in relation to the movement of the boat that navigates on it, and of the man who moves around the boat. If unity in the Mediterranean only occurs through movement and differentiation, as Fernand Braudel first pointed out, here nothing stays the same. The camera itself constantly moves, striving to attain an impossible cinematic representation of this simultaneous movement at different levels, which is nevertheless the very key of the Mediterranean narrative these works ultimately aim to propose.

Finally, it is noteworthy that in *Middle Sea*, as already in *Saphir*, the man mostly offers the viewer only one eye, either because his face fits only partially in the frame, or because he is shown in profile. Once he sets sail for his journey, the man is again the Cyclops of Rumiz's narrative island. He keeps looking ahead with a single eye, exploring possibilities for an alternative narrative of the very Mediterranean space he is crossing. At the same time, he is also a renewed Ulysses; not, however, Franco Cassano's monolithic Homeric hero of "return," the one that Rumiz/Ulysses already questioned. The man here is rather Dante's shipwrecked Ulysses, who embraces his own perpetual condition of movement.<sup>135</sup> In Karen Pinkus reading

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<sup>135</sup> I am referring here to Claudio Fogu's articulation of this double character of Ulysses through the opposition between Franco Cassano's Homeric hero and Massimo Cacciari's Ulysses of the *Divine Comedy*. (See Fogu 2010: 16). However, Dante's Ulysses I have in mind here differs from the interpretation Cacciari gives of him. Cacciari quite persuasively explains, using various sources and drawing conclusions especially from Dante's *Convivio*, that in *Inferno* Dante punishes Ulysses because his behavior has not been ethical in the Aristotelian terms Dante himself embraces. In other words, Dante condemns his *curiositas*, insofar as it prevented the hero from going back

of the hero's gesture – in her study of the implication of the category of risk when applied to the concept of sustainability – Dante's Ulysses keeps "harboring forth" or "in-securing," where his action can be intended, in Heidegger's terms, as un-harboring (from the German verb *Entbergen*) from safety to risk. This is what the closing shot of the video, after the end credits, might suggest: a rope is unanchored, and the man is possibly leaving for a further journey across the space of the sea. Here then, as Pinkus suggests, "risk is not only mere 'danger' or 'difficulty to be avoided at sea,' but also that which saves, harbors, precisely in in-securing." (Pinkus 74)

*Floating Coffins* does not provide an outcome to the last open gesture of *Middle Sea*. The residual and solitary human presence of the man in the second piece of the trilogy is definitely gone here, as the videos only show ruins, water, and the additional element of the desert's sand. As Le Feuvre suggests, the work presents "an image of the end of the world where dystopian and utopian imagined futures rest, supported by each other, side by side." (Le Feuvre 46) The two very contested zones of the Mediterranean Sea and the North African desert are brought together in the single space of this last installation, whose disturbing narrative might seem at first to leave no room for hope. However, what Le Feuvre refers to as the dystopian and the utopian characters of the work might ultimately tend towards the same direction, which has to be necessarily a look beyond the apparent immobility of the real. As Sedira's artwork overcomes the risks of a documentary representation of reality, it can point towards a way out of the impasse, beyond the undoubtedly tragic appearance of reality itself.

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home to his "ethical" duties. However, it is precisely this dramatic condition of oscillation between the desire to go back to Ithaca and the parallel desire to keep traveling what makes the figure fascinating, and creates the fortunate imaginary of Dante's Ulysses. At the same time, the hero does not have to be necessarily impious if he ultimately embraces his own condition of shipwreck. This condition, although dramatic, is the only one that allows him not to renounce his pelagic perception of the Mediterranean, while endlessly moving towards the possibility of a conciliation of land and sea in this very space of the Mediterranean.

Laggoune-Aklouche, while insisting on the overall dimension of doom, tragedy, disaster, and death that, according to her, pervades *Floating Coffins*, notes how the permanent sense of movement that the work clearly conveys is nevertheless accompanied by a persistent feeling of uncertainty and unease. The shipwreck here, “associated with the existentialist idea of drifting with all its socio-economic, cultural, and environmental implications,” (Laggoune-Aklouche 83) would then be perpetual and irreversible in the acknowledgment of its dramatic condition. The camera keeps focusing at different lengths on the various ships left to rot along the coast of Mauritania. The location is particularly significant, as the videos are shot close to the harbor of Nouadhibou, a major point of exit for African migrants towards Europe, but also well known as the world’s largest ships’ graveyard. Here, then, the sea is supposed to witness at the same time lifeless ships and dead bodies. Undoubtedly, after the climax of the previous two works, in which the sea seems to progressively fulfill promises of openness and movement, the third work of the trilogy appears at least ambiguous. However, the never-ending shipwreck it portrays could still figure, as in Shauba’s dramatic monologue, as a potential form of resistance against the very threat of an immobile death, by virtue of allowing a perpetual narrative challenge to silence and oblivion. The boat can, in other words, become again a space of visibility, as to bear testimony to both the ecological disaster and the human deaths it witnesses.

Images of rusty boats brushed by the ocean at the edge of the desert keep fading in and out at regular intervals on fourteen different screens. The simultaneous concurrence of so many images, together with the multiple sounds released by eight round speakers, contributes decisively to the overall ambiguity of the installation, which disorients the fruition and challenges any interpretation. As Christine Ross notes in the case of Melik Ohanian’s works, “the installation inscribes the viewer in a perceptual impossibility,” where the experience of the impossibility “suggests a contemporaneity of different times, but a contemporaneity that can

never be grasped as a whole.” (Ross 2012: 213) The soundscape is far more threatening and aggressive than in the previous two parts of the trilogy. Not only is the sound of the sea waves sensibly louder and ominously insistent, but the viewer can also hear, and feel, the wind of the Ocean. There is also the quasi-obsessive presence of the seagulls, whose sound again is much more disquieting and dreadful than the birds’ distant sounds in both *Saphir* and *Middle Sea*. The whole landscape, in other words, seems to be somehow suspended in a state of alarm that recalls sections of Rumiz’s narrative, where the island would also at times appear in a condition of tension and alert.

The only human presence within the whole space of the video installation is the solitary figure of a man. He is, however, shot from afar, and appears extremely little against the huge profile of one of the many abandoned merchants ships that are the true protagonists of the videos. While rusty and ruined parts of those relics are often shot closely in some of the videos, thus given full prominence in the whole narrative, the man never appears on a close-up, but rather he remains anonymous, distant, less than a side character of the story. The confident look of the one-eyed actor in *Saphir* and *Middle Sea* is all vanished with him, while here the human figure only proves its insignificance in a global context of eco-disaster.

As in the previous works of the trilogy, movement here functions at different levels, although its narrative gets more complicated and less transparent. While the movement of the sea feels more threatening than comforting in its insistent indifference to the surroundings, the repetitive shots of the big ships imply the acknowledgement of the current immobility against a past condition of movement across the Ocean. The ruins of the ships do not seem to resemble Rumiz’s “noble ruins.” These relics in *Floating Coffins* do not perform any kind of resistance or adaptation to the surrounding environment, thus not showing any potentiality for the future. They are neither witnesses of a past that needs to be remembered, nor positive images of a lack

that can prelude to a potential becoming. They are only the visual and material crystallization of a pending threat that seems to be overwhelming.

Within the larger space of the exhibition, here more than in the previous works, movement is required on the audience's side too. The viewer's eyes, more precisely, are expected to constantly move from one video to the other, trying to follow the scattered traces of a fragmented narrative that is neither linear nor circular, but rather dispersed. The audience, in other words, is left with the arduous task to rearrange the small pieces of a lost whole. As in a close-up shot of the video installation, the rope, which in *Middle Sea* carried the promise of a further journey, here is instead full of tight knots, which seem impossible to untie.

The peculiar form of the multi-screen video installation, as a “practice that produces both temporal extendedness and instantaneousness,” (Ross 85) is particularly relevant here. *Floating Coffins* visually expresses a narrative that does not entirely refuse development, while at the same time being the result of juxtaposed video shots that need to be interpreted individually. The contradiction here between duration and immediacy is only apparent, as the visual urgency of the single shots does not erase the narrative dimension of the whole installation, which only the viewer is responsible for assessing.

There are a few passages of the whole video installation that lead to a possible way out of a process of decay that seems, otherwise, implacable and irreversible. One of them has to do with the apparent dichotomy of light and darkness that already informed Rumiz's narrative island. While most of the scenes are shot at daytime, there is a short sequence in which the sun is about to set; then the soundtrack gets softer, and the whole context appears more peaceful and reassuring. It is as if the fading light on the edge of darkness were able to activate different ways of seeing, better revealing the contradictions, and the possible breaking points, of a threatening condition that in the sunshine can just dazzle and overwhelm. Only if capable of

seeing through the obscurity of the present times, as in Agamben's suggestion, the "contemporary" viewer can finally make sense of, and act in, them. Here, Sedira's video art seems to best show its performative character, so as to become a site of critical engagement through its interconnected dimensions of plurality and contemporaneity.<sup>136</sup>

Towards the end of *Floating Coffins*, there is another quite enigmatic scene, whose tone contrasts sharply with that of the whole piece. It is a brief shot which captures a quiet image of flamingos resting on a pond, surrounded by greenish grass, with the desert land on the background. It is an image of peaceful integration between the animals and the surrounding environment. Significantly, this environment includes both water and land, or, more precisely, both an enclosed body of water and the land of the desert. The scene suggests again, as in the ending lines of Prosa's play, that enduring hope and resistance, which the residual green of the vegetation symbolizes, may lie in the space where Rumiz's "desertic space" of the sea and the space of the desert itself meet. This space seems to be precisely the space of a Mediterranean sea that is geographically enclosed, as the image of the pond suggests, but at the same time open to the land around it; a condition that, on the contrary, seems unattainable in the case of the open space of the Atlantic Ocean, as it appears in the whole work.

However, the shot I have just analyzed does not last long, followed, at the very end of the video installation, by the returning loud sound of waves and winds, while, on a single screen, parts of ships appear again floating on the surface of the Ocean. This closing scene reminds the audience that the threat is ultimately real and tangible, and that, as such, must be acknowledged and addressed. However, the barking of a dog on a black screen is the last element of the artwork the audience is left with. The auditory dimension finally takes over the

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<sup>136</sup> For the conception of the "contemporary" as the person who is able to perceive her own time through its darkness, see Agamben 2009. For the performative, plural, and contemporary dimensions of video art see Hayden 2015.



visual one, or better the affirmative presence of the former compensates for the uncertain vanishing of the latter. The animal sound this last time is not that of birds, persistent and uncanny throughout the piece, but rather of a dog, the domestic animal *par excellence*. The dog's unseen presence seems ultimately to remind the audience of the necessary alliance between human and non-human that Rumiz's narrative island already embraced. More specifically, Sedira suggests here that the man and the animal must be able to perform a reciprocal gesture of adaptation within a Mediterranean that is constantly at risk, and yet able to find, within its own space, the way to keep moving towards the future.

### The Lighthouse

It is significant that the ultimate materialization of a space where such a coexistence of humans and non-humans may happen, within the larger space of the Mediterranean Sea, seems in Sedira's work to be the lighthouse, namely the ambiguous element at the core of Rumiz's narrative. The last of the artist's works I will analyze here is also the most recent one, *Lighthouse in the Sea of Time*, from 2011. Here, many of the elements already present in the previous works are rearranged as to get a renewed formulation. The setting is back in Algeria, although the videos move between two different locations, one very close and the other quite far from Algiers. The human presence is also reinstated here, where it actually plays a much bigger role, as one of three videos that constitute the work is entirely occupied by the figure of the lighthouse keeper.

While the three videos follow three different narratives, they are nevertheless deeply interconnected with one another, and, as such, they are also shown at the same time. As the title of the installation itself suggests, it aims to restore the historical depth of the Mediterranean through the testimony of two of its lighthouses. In her own words, Sedira intends to celebrate a

profession that is still alive in Algeria, whereas lighthouses in France have been mostly automated. The simultaneity that informs the installation complicates this diachronic dimension of the Mediterranean, where the synchronic images aim to also offer different perspectives on the same contemporary topic.

The first video focuses on two different lighthouses in Algeria, which seem interestingly to represent two of the different kinds of lighthouse Rumiz describes in the following passage: “Pare che nel mondo i fari siano di tre tipi: il “paradiso,” che sta confortevolmente piantato in terraferma; “il purgatorio,” aggrappato agli ultimi promontori rocciosi; e l’“inferno,” perduto su qualche isolotto disabitato al largo.”<sup>137</sup> (Rumiz 114-5) The lighthouse that Rumiz narrates obviously belongs to the third category, while Sedira’s lighthouses fall in the second and in the first group respectively. It is not by chance, then, that Sedira’s purgatorial lighthouse seems at first closer to Rumiz’s infernal one than the paradisiac. Or maybe, as I will suggest later, the relation among the three is even more subtle and complex.

The first of the two lighthouses to appear on the video is Cap Sigli, in Kabylia, built on 1906 on a promontory, within a landscape that immediately reveals its harshness and isolation. Since the very beginning, the video shows the coexistence and coming to terms of this very landscape with the mechanical tool of the lighthouse, as the two interact on two different screens. The video starts on the first screen with the sound of sea waves and winds, and with dark images of the promontory at nighttime. However, these shots are immediately followed by a close-up on the rotatory movement, accompanied by the related mechanical sound, of the lighthouse lamp on the second screen. Rumiz’s narrative too, since the very beginning, affirmed the deep interaction between the two dimensions of the lighthouse and the landscape around it.

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<sup>137</sup> “It seems that there are three different kinds of lighthouses in the world: “the paradise,” which is comfortably plunged into the land; “the purgatory,” grabbed on to the last rocky promontories; and “the hell,” lost offshore on some small uninhabited island.”

On the first night he recalls inside of the lighthouse, the writer notes: “Se tendo l’orecchio sento il canto monotono dell’ingranaggio in cima alla torre, [...] un arpeggio metallico come di pianoforte scordato, ma capace di duettare col vento costruendo accordi in minore.”<sup>138</sup> (Rumiz 12) The sound that defines the function of the lighthouse does not contrast, but rather harmonizes with the sound of the winds that encircle the mechanical tool with their own movement. Moreover, the lighthouse participates in the outside movement, as the lamp’s continuous rotation captures the viewer’s eye with the hypnotic effect that – as we have seen – makes Rumiz believe that the tower, and not simply the light, is rotating. Throughout the video, the open space of the landscape that surrounds the lighthouse and the lighthouse itself keep alternating on the screen. Even more, the former again permeates the latter, where the lantern room of the lighthouse allows for glimpses of the sea.

The human figure, although it appears much later, seems nevertheless to find its own space in the already established context of interaction between the natural and the technological. The presence of a man is at first perceived through his own climbing the stairs of the lighthouse. Only his legs are visible, while the audience can hear the sound of his footsteps. Then, he appears outside of the lighthouse, looking with binoculars at a ship far away on the sea, which comes into sight on a closer shot on the second screen. The man is extremely small against the gigantic structure of the lighthouse, and the image recalls immediately the one from *Floating Coffins*, where the human figure is equally little against the carcasses of the ships. Here, however, the man appears again in some of the following scenes, in which he interacts significantly with the object, performing his own duties in relation to it and to the sea that surrounds it. He is shown both outside of the lighthouse, in the act of cleaning the glass

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<sup>138</sup> “If I keep an ear out for it, I can hear the monotonous sound of the gear at the top of the tower, [...] a metallic arpeggio as if coming from an out of tune piano, and yet able to do a duet with the wind, assembling minor chords.”

windows of the lantern room, and inside of the tool, writing down annotations on the lighthouse notebooks. Moreover, the whole section devoted to this first lighthouse closes on the silent figure of the retired lighthouse keeper, whose own presence, at the bottom of the promontory, seems to point towards endurance and resistance to the passage of time. Even once dispensed from his own duties, the old keeper, as Rumiz's donkey, keeps looking firmly ahead, giving visual, though still silent, testimony of his own story.

The remaining part of the first video focuses on the other Algerian lighthouse of Cap Caxine, built on 1868 on the outskirts of Algiers. As the first shots reveal, this lighthouse belongs to a very different kind of landscape from the one that characterizes Cap Sigli, as the viewer can glimpse immediately the urban surroundings on the background. Moreover, the way in which the artist chooses to frame this second lighthouse contrasts quite sharply with the previous one, to the point that she must be trying to attach a further meaning to this very contrast.

The register Sedira applies to the lighthouse of Cap Caxine is one characterized by deep darkness and desolation. From when it first appears on the screen up to the end of the whole video, a cloudy and dark sky looms over the lighthouse, as opposed to the clear and light-blue sky of Cap Sigli. The contrast is not only visual, but also auditory. The persistent beating down of the rain, which also contributes to the gloomy feeling of the whole image, disturbs and at times even covers the sound of the sea waves. The only human presence in this section of the video is that of the retired lighthouse keeper, though shot only briefly from a distance, while the only light is the artificial light of the lamp, whose rotatory movement appears again on a full screen.

The clear contraposition the artist is posing between the two Algerian lighthouses might be interpreted, on the line of Rumiz's narrative, as a further reaffirmation of the necessary

coexistence, and possible integration, not only of land and sea, but also of technological, human, and non-human life. If the Mediterranean is a space of close interaction between the physical and the human realm, as once again Braudel first pointed out, the lighthouse, then, seems to be the possible materialization of this unavoidable interaction. A mechanical and technological tool, built by humans in the shape of an animal, the lighthouse participates in the land and the sea at the same time, being a necessary tool for navigation that, however, stands on land.

This condition of reciprocal adaptation between human and non-human life seems to be achievable, or even already realized, in the space of Cap Sigli. Here, both the movement and the sound of the lighthouse accord their rhythm to the surrounding landscape, and the human as well negotiates its own role in relation to both the mechanical and the natural environment in which it participates. The art critic Coline Millard interprets the two lighthouses as leading towards two different temporal lines of navigation, one towards the past, in the case of Cap Sigli, and the other, Cap Caxine, oriented towards the future. However, even though Cap Caxine's location marks the turning points of an important navigation route, whereas Cap Sigli is a lighthouse of secondary landing, Sedira seems to favor the symbolic value over the real function. The memory of the past that the lighthouse in Cap Sigli preserves is necessary to imagine the future, as the coming together of the retired and the current lighthouse keepers in the first scene of the second video signifies.

The two different lighthouses the artist compares in her video can also be interpreted as the two different sides of Rumiz's Cyclops, so that the infernal lighthouse he narrates could be seen as ultimately incorporating in itself both the paradisiac and the purgatorial. Rumiz's Cyclops, as the whole island on which it stands, is threatening and reassuring at the same time, an ambiguous figure that makes a strength out of its own contradictory aspects. Significantly,

not even in Cap Caxine can the lamp be blinded and silenced by the overwhelming and gloomy surroundings, but rather, it keeps enlightening and moving with its own pace. The lighthouse, then, is, in Sedira's artistic narrative as already in Rumiz's literary one, the ultimate bastion of resistance, capable of adapting and renegotiating its role and position in the world around it.

The second video, *The Life of a Lighthouse keeper*, projected on a single screen, focuses entirely on the male figure already briefly appeared in the first section of the previous video. It is the keeper of the lighthouse on Cap Sigli that, in line with the interpretation of the two lighthouses we have just sketched, Sedira chooses to give voice to. In a eleven-minute monologue in which the camera keeps focusing on a close-up of the man's face, Krime, the keeper, answers the questions of an invisible, and silent, interviewer, providing the audience with details of his job, or rather of his whole life in relation to the lighthouse.<sup>139</sup> In *Il Ciclope*, Rumiz creates a narrative in and of the lighthouse that resonates with all the other narratives he heard about other lighthouses. In this way, the Cyclops itself becomes the ultimate repository of multiple stories and the materialization of the power of narrative itself. In Sedira's video too, Krime's monologue is a celebration of the narrative power of the lighthouse. The man keeps alive the memory of his profession by "narrativizing" it in the space of his own speech.

However, the dimension of the past Sedira aims to bring back in the space of her contemporary work is relevant only when it informs the present and translates into a potentiality for the future. Krime testifies to the present condition of a profession that is still alive, and that is fully aware of its own role. The lighthouse keeper knows that he needs to be constantly alert as to "almost sleep with one eye open," as he himself admits. As this image suggests, Krime is

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<sup>139</sup> It is interesting that the man in the video speaks in French, and not in Arabic, especially considering the artist's intention to highlight, in the whole installation, the difference between French and Algerian lighthouses. It might have been Sedira's own decision to make him use French in order for the video to be immediately accessible to a larger audience. However, the video features English subtitles, so that the question of accessibility is also immediately addressed, and solved, in this way. What are the implications of choosing French over Arabic? Does it diminish, or rather enhance, the message of the work?

the Cyclops' only eye and the lighthouse itself, which he asserts he will never leave. He is the symbolic personification of a vigilant core of resistance that, in the face of a depersonalizing globalization, can still promote cooperation among the different elements that participate in it.

Significantly, Krimo notes that among the various visitors to the lighthouse over the years there are a consistent number of writers, who have often left note of the thoughts the visit itself provoked. Among them, Krimo recalls the Algerian poet Tahar Djaout, whose note reads: "I did not know there was such a miraculous place, telling us that a lost corner can also become the center of the world."<sup>140</sup> In the writer's word, but also by virtue of the writer's own celebration, this localized and isolated space of a lighthouse can become, as Rumiz's whole island, a new center for the emergence of a counter-narrative of the Mediterranean to which it belongs.

At the last moment of the video, the camera leaves Krimo's face to go back, one last time, to the sea waves, registering once again their sound, before closing on a shot of the lighthouse. Throughout the work, the camera lens designs a visual circle that moves from the lighthouse, to the human, the landscape, and back to the lighthouse itself, reaffirming the necessary interaction of the different elements in the space of the Mediterranean. At the same time, the human voice, predominant for the whole video, finally reconciles itself with the sound of the sea, fully reinstating the polyphonic voice of a narrative Mediterranean that keeps resisting to the threat of being silenced.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> The note is in French, and the translation is provided by the subtitles within the video itself.

<sup>141</sup> The last video of the work has a French title, *La Montée*, and shows for the first time a female figure that slowly climbs the stairs of the same lighthouse, in Cap Sigli. Then, she sits in the interior of the lighthouse and looks at some notebooks, where names and messages from various visitors alternate in multiple languages. The female figure might be the artist herself, but the video leaves it uncertain on purpose, as there is not a single close-up of the woman, first shot from afar, while she climbs the stairs, and then her face completely erased, while the camera focuses on the notebook's pages. Although the female presence might be significant here in its first occurrence, and possibly require further investigation, the focus remains on the lighthouse. In any case, the whole video is not particularly relevant for the purposes of my argumentation here, which is why I decided not to include a discussion of it in my analysis.

### Mediterranean Art: the MuCEM and Sedira's Work within it

Within the long-established field of Mediterranean Studies, the sub-field of Mediterranean literature has been receiving increasing critical attention, as the recent spread of university courses on the subject testifies. In a similar way, the intention to categorize under the common label of “Mediterranean art” different artistic expressions belonging to various geographical and historical contexts has long been circulating, and has been recently institutionalized in the cultural space of the MuCEM. “The Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations,” realized in 2013 in Marseilles, re-proposes in its own name the old dichotomy of Europe and the Mediterranean that keeps haunting, and ultimately invalidates, any attempt to fully understand the Mediterranean itself. However, the building that hosts, and also incarnates the idea of, the museum, as well as some aspects of the permanent exhibition, seems to point towards a different narrative of the Mediterranean. The museum is itself “a narrative that moves off the page and screen entirely and is positioned in the environment,” a narrative “on the ground,” as Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu remind us in their recent study of the relation between space and narrative (Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu 5). It is a narrative that is not based on such a binary opposition to Europe, but that, on the contrary, focuses on the acknowledgment of a constantly moving and changing conception of the Mediterranean itself, which inevitably relies on the overcoming of clear-cut boundaries. I am aware of the risks that the idea of a museum of the Mediterranean carries with itself, as it intends to categorize and circumscribe an artistic world that is extremely diversified and fragmented, while also being inevitably informed by a persisting power imbalance. However, the narrative the museum itself creates does not erase or dismiss its own contradictions. On the contrary, it embraces them by refusing to offer solutions,



while only pointing towards possible routes that acknowledge – and make a strength out of – their own instability.

The location and the structure of the museum highlight the same conditions of movement, permeability and interaction that both Rumiz and Sedira create in their respective narratives. Also, and not by chance, one of Sedira's works I have just presented figures in the museum as the last piece of the permanent exhibition, reaffirming the significance of her artistic narrative of and in the Mediterranean itself. As it mostly happens in historical museums, the MuCEM creates and narrates its own story of the Mediterranean both “through the arrangements of exhibits in the museum space and in the idiom of architectural design.” (Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu 182)

The museum consists of two conjoined structures that extend on the area of the old port of the French city of Marseilles. The J4 building, erected on the site of the homonymous pier, today disappeared, is linked to the ancient Fort Saint-Jean, built on the seventeenth century by Louis XIV. The whole museum lies on an iconic location, from a historical, memorial, and symbolic point of view. Since the ancient Phoenician origin and until mid-nineteenth century, “le Vieux-Port” was the heart of the city, the main port of transit and a fundamental crossing point for goods and people. Before the emigration towards the New World became so significant as to require the realization of a second, and bigger port, on the north end of the city, the old port was the extreme offshoot of Marseilles towards its Mediterranean neighbors. Thus, the MuCEM is also an example of what Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu call a “landscape narrative,” as the site on which it lies relates and contributes to the whole narrative project of the museum itself.

The J4 building, designed by the French architect Rudy Ricciotti, is built entirely in fiber-cement and inherently conceived, with “its structural thinness, its lack of reflection, and its

dullness,”<sup>142</sup> as a metaphor of the Mediterranean space itself. In the architect’s own view, the “massiveness” of the Fort Saint-Jean had to be counterbalanced by the “dematerialization” of the new building, which is indeed all “permeable” to sun and wind. Thus, this new voluntarily reproduces on purpose the dimension of constant interaction and reciprocal permeability of the solid and the fluid that we have seen operating in many of Sedira’s works, starting with the ruined buildings of *Framing the View*.

Moreover, the whole building is oriented towards south, which, again in the words of its designer, “is a mental journey, and not a birth certificate,” the proposition of a movement towards all the other Mediterranean shores. On the site of the old port, the Fort as well, once a means of defense against external aggressors, is also inevitably a link, a protrusion of the city into the sea, and beyond it. The new adjunct structure of the J4, then, intends to reopen the whole city towards its maritime horizons, in order to “force it to rethink its Mediterranean identity and its collective memory,” as the historian Jean-Jacques Jordi suggests.<sup>143</sup> Thus, the whole structure of the MuCEM ultimately extends itself beyond its architectural and urban limits, opening up to the space of a Mediterranean whose artistic dimension the museum wishes at the same time to enclose.

The scientific project that informs the permanent exhibition of the so-called Mediterranean gallery aims to present Mediterranean civilizations through their four supposed specificities. The first one is the culture of wheat, vines and olives, which characterizes the Mediterranean agricultural landscape. Monotheism, incarnated in the holy city of Jerusalem, and citizenship, a concept developed in ancient times within the Greek civilization, constitute the second and third distinctive Mediterranean characteristics to which the gallery calls

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<sup>142</sup> I am quoting from an interview with Rudy Ricciotti, printed on the bimonthly *TDC*, n. 1055, May 2013, p. 28. The text is in French, and the English translation is mine.

<sup>143</sup> See *TDC*, n. 1005, May 2013, p. 19.

attention. Finally, the maritime routes that crisscross the Mediterranean Sea emblemize the fourth, and last, specific Mediterranean trait. These routes highlight the inherent dimension of traveling and exploring of the whole Mediterranean space, through which it also ceases to be a world enclosed in itself.

This conceptual framework of the MuCEM art gallery translates inevitably into the exhibition of manufactures and testimonies intended to reenact all these fourth diachronic dimensions of the Mediterranean, conceived as a geographical, historical, and cultural space. Within this framework, contemporary Mediterranean art can still find its own space, so as to make its presence if not extensive, yet visible and consistent throughout the larger space of the museum. Besides its main and permanent gallery, the MuCEM frequently hosts temporary exhibitions and performances, mostly devoted to contemporary artists coming from all the different shores of the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, the visit of the main gallery ends with the exposition of three contemporary works, largely framed within the fourth section, which focuses, as I mentioned, on the discovery of maritime trade routes by Mediterranean seafarers. Thus, in the very narrative space of the museum, “architecture, exhibits, and text are interwoven spatially to redefine the relationship between narrative sequence and circulation.” (Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu 183) Shown under the further label of “Construction, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction,” these three last works ultimately reaffirms Rumiz’s and Sedira’s Mediterranean narrative of hope and resistance. It is a narrative in which the affirmative movement of re-construction, which not by chance Sedira’s *Middle Sea* incarnates here, finally overcomes the negative impasse of “deconstruction,” translating the uncertainty of the present into a potentiality for the future.

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<sup>144</sup> When I visited the museum in June 2016, there was a multidisciplinary project dedicated to Beirut (*Beyrouth ya Beyrouth*), with installations, talks, performances, films, and concerts all intended to explore the city through its “*mémoires, guerres et représentations*.”

The first of the three works is Anne and Patrick Poirier's *Ruins of Egypt*, a porcelain centerpiece from 1978, commissioned by Sèvres and inspired by Napoleon's Egyptian Campaign of 1799. The installation is modeled in five sections which feature collapsing Egyptian ruins, including a pyramid, the Colossus at Memnon and an arcade of ancient columns centering a faux reflecting pool. The two French artists have long been fascinated with ruins, intended as positive landmarks of a past that, otherwise, runs the risk of fading away. In this case, the term "construction" under which the work is shown refers to the fundamental, and active, role of memory in preserving and transmitting the meaning of the past, in face of the fragility of civilizations that the work itself signifies. However, this constructive vision of culture and memory in the Mediterranean might prove too simplistic, or at least too narrow, if proposed as the ultimate alternative to oblivion and forgetfulness; if, in other words, the constructive gesture is directed only backward, towards the past itself, and not forward. To fully enact their meaning for the future, ruins must be seen, as in Rumiz's narrative, as potential realizations of their own apparent lack, and not as untouchable vestiges to be venerated.

Thus, the second piece of this last sequence is supposed to challenge such a constructive gesture towards the past, complicating the picture from the fragmented perspective of the present. The work is *Circle of Confusion*, by the two Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. In this monumental and impressive installation, a large aerial view of Beirut is decomposed through 3000 removable pieces, whose mosaic allows for glimpses of the mirror behind it. As visitors are supposed to pull out pieces of the work, the image becomes more and more fragmented, revealing the impossibility to define and grasp the totality of a city that, as the back of each piece reads, "does not exist." Thus, beyond the specific case of Beirut, the artwork aims to affirm the further impossibility to understand, face, and represent the complexity of the whole Mediterranean. A Mediterranean that, as the piece expresses, continuously moves and

changes, “where everyone projects her own personal experience and perceives the other through the mirror of her own culture,” as Jean-Roch Bouiller, curator of contemporary art at the MuCEM, notes.<sup>145</sup>

As *Circle of Confusion* suggests, a homogenous, coherent, and linear narrative of the Mediterranean is never to be achieved, and, I would add, is not even desirable. However, this does not mean that a fragmented and erratic one should not be proposed and envisioned. Thus, the deconstructive view of the Mediterranean is the second to last of the whole gallery, followed by one last single artwork, which is, as I anticipated, Sedira’s *Middle Sea*. In the words again of Jean-Roch Bouiller, the choice of Sedira’s video installation as the closing one of the whole exhibition is intended to address the Mediterranean dream of the Sea as an area of fruitful exchange, shared among the different cultures that flourish on its shores. What interests me more, in the framework of my own proposal for a Mediterranean narrative of hope and resistance, is that Sedira’s work features, in the MuCEM, under the sign of “reconstruction.” As I already suggested in my analysis of the work, *Middle Sea* aims to move beyond the historical reality of the sea, beyond its long celebrated past. It focuses, on the contrary, on the open possibilities for the future of the Mediterranean Sea, a future that lies in the journey, in the never-ending movement across it. If, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s words, the artists create worlds that are “there every time to open the world to itself, to its possibility of world,” (Nancy 93) Sedira creates the possibility of an alternative Mediterranean that emerges from within her own Mediterranean narrative. And this is why Sedira’s art is “so contemporary: an immediate, instantaneous yet infinitely repeatable event, an intensely felt, personal *and* shared experience, one that is evidently open-futured yet instantly readable, and singular while also, apparently, resonant of a world much larger than that of art.” (Smith, 2014: 1) Sedira’s artistic narrative,

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<sup>145</sup> In *TDC*, n. 1055, May 2013, p. 44. Once again, I am providing the translation of the original French.

thus, resonates with Rumiz's literary one insofar as they both move from specific locations within the Mediterranean in order to open the whole space of the Mediterranean to its own narrative for the future.

## Chapter Three

### Desert narrative

*Il deserto mi si presenta come ciò  
che, della realtà, è solo indispensabile.  
[The desert appears to me as that part  
of reality that is alone indispensable]  
Pier Paolo Pasolini, Teorema*

#### Mediterranean Sea- and Land-scapes

The two previous chapters have shown how the dimension of movement – in its concrete manifestations as well as in its narrative forms – is central to a renewed conception of the Mediterranean as both a real and an imaginary space characterized by continuous interactions and endless change. As we have seen, movement within the contemporary Mediterranean occurs, first of all, in the “liquid” space of the sea, constantly crossed by countless migrants’ boats, whose middle passage Prosa’s and Moghrabi’s narratives powerfully give voice to. Movement within the sea also implies the attempt to move from one land to the other; an attempt that can sometimes, as in Shauba’s case, remain only potential, gaining meaning from its own impossible actualization. If Shauba can ultimately only move in the in-between space, which is the space of the sea itself, Rumiz’s Mediterranean journey addresses a further, and only apparently paradoxical, dimension of movement within the Mediterranean space. The Italian journalist’s static movement within the space of his unknown Mediterranean island – and also in the vertical space of the lighthouse – challenges any presumed Mediterranean immobility, recovering the complexities of the whole Mediterranean space in the context of the larger world.

If Mediterranean movement occurs both across the sea and across the different lands that the sea itself separates and connects at the same time, it also occurs within the space of the land.

More specifically, movement characterizes the landscape of the desert, which I will focus on in this last chapter. But how, and to what extent, can the desert be considered a Mediterranean space? The Mediterranean-ness of the Sahara already emerged from my reading of the narratives in the previous chapters. Shauba's potential Mediterranean journey moves from the sand of the African desert to the (ultimately unreachable) sand of Lampedusa beach. In Prosa's narrative, then, the sand, which is both the sand of the seashore and the desert's sand, is a synecdoche for land itself. It becomes the only kind of land the migrant can either experience or dream of and, as such, it is a land that ultimately reaffirms the inseparability between sea and land itself within the space of the Mediterranean. The sea and the desert also constantly share the frame of the videos in Sedira's *Floating Coffins*. The artist's work, which aims to raise awareness of the environmental threats that both sea and desert have to face, also creates the visual narrative of a shared Mediterranean land- and sea-scape, which constitutes a potential space of resistance.

Thus, the specific land of the desert seems to assume a Mediterranean character, and to gain a particular meaning from its relationship with the Mediterranean Sea, in some of the narratives I have previously discussed. At the same time, the dimension of movement that characterizes the desert within the whole space of the Mediterranean further points to the correspondence, and interrelation, between the desert itself and the space of the sea. As Alessandra Di Maio points out in her study of Andrea Segre's cinematic works on Mediterranean migration, migrants' movement across the desert constitutes a fundamental, and often dismissed, aspect of the phenomenon of migration as a whole. In Moghrabi's narrative, both Umm Farah and Bahija, the two women of the wind who face, with different outcomes, the middle passage across the Mediterranean Sea, had first experienced the desert passage. They had moved from Iraq and from Morocco respectively, and then traveled either west- or eastward



across the desert in order to reach Libya, the ultimate departure point for the sea journey. In her novel, Moghrabi narrates a double Mediterranean passage (or rather, the double dimension of a single passage), which comprises movement across both sea and land.

Thus, the Mediterranean works I focused on in the previous chapters already include the desert within the larger Mediterranean space they refer to, and also create, in their narratives. If the (desert's) sand is the only land that Shauba can think of throughout her physical and narrative shipwreck, in Moghrabi's work the Sahara desert participates in the larger dimension of movement that informs the phenomenon of migration. At the same time, Sedira's visual narrative of the encounter between the sea and the desert is a powerful reminder of the coexistence, and necessary interaction, of land and sea within the whole, and larger, space of the Mediterranean; coexistence and interaction that Rumiz also gives voice to in the narrative space of his Mediterranean island. The enclosed Mediterranean Sea, surrounded and circumscribed by land, resembles, and shares its space with, the Sahara desert, which is in turn all contained by water. In other words, it might not be that, as Matvejević puts it, the Mediterranean Sea loses part of its character when it meets with the desert, but rather that the two spaces get their own character – which I would call Mediterranean – precisely from their reciprocal encounter.<sup>1</sup>

The historical and geographical scholarship on the Mediterranean, which has provided an important starting point for my investigation of contemporary Mediterranean narratives in the previous chapters, has also repeatedly addressed, and ultimately asserted, the Mediterranean character of the Sahara desert. In his pioneering and influential work on the Mediterranean as a geographical and cultural unity, Fernand Braudel does not precisely define the geographical boundaries of his own object of study. However, the definition of “Greatest Mediterranean” that

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<sup>1</sup> See Matvejević 1995.

he applies to his geographical space of investigation already implies the acknowledgment of a Mediterranean space that extends far beyond the shores of the sea. As Concannon and Mazurek point out in the context of their own post-braudelian study of the ancient Mediterranean:

Despite his recognition of the importance of defining the Mediterranean as a conceptual unit, Braudel himself was purposefully vague in his definition, preferring to view the Mediterranean in the broadest sense. The Braudelian Mediterranean thus includes the Sahara desert, the Appennine mountains, the Black Sea, Germany and Poland, and in a way, the Atlantic Ocean.”

(Concannon and Mazurek 5)

Not only does the French historian include the Sahara desert within the large, and quite nuanced, boundaries of his Mediterranean space, but he also highlights how any understanding of the whole Mediterranean needs to acknowledge the impossible separation of land and sea, as “the sea’s history is recorded in its various forms on the land masses that surround it.” (Braudel 170) Braudel’s assertion of the mutual dependence, and reciprocal influence, of land and sea undoubtedly resonates with Rumiz’s and Sedira’s Mediterranean narratives. At the same time, Braudel asserts the dimension of movement as characteristic of both sea and land, and of the desert’s land in particular, since he describes nomadism as “one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Mediterranean world,” and a kind of “perpetual movement” that “involves the whole community.” (Braudel 85) Thus, from Braudel’s geo-historical point of view, the Sahara desert coexists with the Mediterranean Sea within the whole space of the Mediterranean, and it also shares with the sea an intrinsic dimension of movement, which is what ultimately defines it.

Braudel is only the first of many historians to insist on the interrelation, and parallelism, between the sea and the desert in the Mediterranean. Among the different “Mediterraneans” that might have played a comparable historical role, and have a similar meaning, to that of the actual Mediterranean Sea, the historian David Abulafia includes the Sahara desert. Echoing Braudel’s remarks, the scholar conceives the desert as somehow symmetrical to the sea, precisely because they are both spaces inherently defined by movement and cross-cultural interactions. In Abulafia’s work, as in Braudel’s, the desert seems to be conceived as another Mediterranean space, parallel to the sea, which shares and reflects the sea’s main characteristics.

Within these same scholarly contributions, however, the Sahara also appears at times as a counter-Mediterranean, which threatens, and is perhaps also threatened by, the sea itself. In Braudel’s words, “the Mediterranean [sea] is attracted towards these desolate shores [of the desert] and attracts them in turn.” (Braudel 171) Moreover, the French historian describes the Sahara in terms of a “devouring landscape,” which is “like the ‘unharvested sea’ of Homer [...] ‘a waterless sea,’ vaster in area than the Mediterranean itself.” (Braudel 173) If the desert Braudel refers to here – a devouring, un-harvested, waterless land with desolate shores – undoubtedly enters the picture under the sign of lack, it is also caught in a dynamic of reciprocal attraction with the sea. In other words, the coexistence of the two elements within the whole Mediterranean appears as risky as it is necessary. If the desert’s landscape threatens the Mediterranean sea-scape, the former also contributes to the very definition of the latter, as one cannot ultimately exist without the other.

As I already pointed out at the beginning of this work, geo-historical studies of the Mediterranean tend to only focus on the ancient, medieval, and modern eras, leaving aside any attempt to interpret the Mediterranean of the present time. How, then, can Braudelian and post-Braudelian qualifications of the Sahara in its Mediterranean terms be extended to the

contemporary real and imaginary space of the desert? If current climate change discourse tends to rely on narratives of desertification, in which the desert itself inevitably becomes a threat within the space of the Mediterranean it also belongs to, how can the desert also be, both within the Mediterranean and in the larger space of the global world, a place for alternatives?<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I show how contemporary Mediterranean narratives of the Sahara desert are able to create this very desert as a space that does not reject its own contradictions, but rather embraces them, precisely by virtue of being narrated as both a threatening and a threatened space. I will focus in particular on Ibrahim Al-Koni's novel *The Bleeding of the Stone*, and I will read it in parallel with his other novel *Gold Dust*, and with the short story *The Desert* by the Lebanese writer Emily Nasrallah. The narrative desert that emerges through these works, I argue, activates the potential dimensions of lack and risk, so that the desert itself becomes a place where threats can be challenged and resisted, and alternatives imagined. These narratives of the Sahara create the desert as a real and an imaginary space that relies on nuanced boundaries between humans and non-humans, as well as between life and death, and where alternative forms of community can be realized. Thus, similarly to the migrants' boat, as narrated through Shauba's dramatic voice, and to the Mediterranean island – and lighthouse – of Rumiz's narrative journey, Al-Koni and Nasrallah's desert can ultimately be seen as a heterotopic space, "the greatest reserve of the imagination," (Foucault 27) where critical thinking can also emerge.

### Mediterranean Spaces: The Sea, the City, and the Desert

The sea narratives I analyzed in the previous chapters come from two opposite – northern and southern – shores of the Mediterranean Sea, enhancing a narrative movement from southern

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<sup>2</sup> Greece and the south of Italy and Spain, Mediterranean places *par excellence* in the common imagination, are also largely identified as the areas most affected, and threatened, by the phenomenon of desertification.

Italy to North Africa, and vice versa. In chapter one, Prosa's dramatization of the Mediterranean middle passage, seen through the African eyes of its narrator/protagonist and, at the same time, through the Sicilian perspective of the author, dialogued with Moghrabi's Libyan narrative of a polyphonic experience of migration. In chapter two, Rumiz's narrative island, and the author's focus on the Cyclopean resistance of the lighthouse within it, resonated with Sedira's video narrative of the coexistence of land and sea, imagined and narrated either from within the sea itself (as in the space of the boat in *Middle Sea*) or from its immediate surroundings (the port and the hotel in *Saphir*, or the desolated sea shores in *Floating Coffins*). In this chapter, I propose the category of the desert narrative through the analysis of literary works that all come from a non-European shore of the Mediterranean. The two authors I will put in dialogue with each other create a link between the southern and the eastern shores of the sea, while also testifying to the special role that the desert itself plays in what I define as a wide (and not only strictly Arab) Mediterranean literary imagination.

For their project "*Les Représentations de la Méditerranée*," the French scholars Thierry Fabre and Robert Ilbert asked several authors from ten different Mediterranean countries to describe their own relationship with the Mediterranean Sea. The results appear quite interesting, especially with respect to the coexistence and reciprocal influence, as suggested in this chapter, between the sea and the desert in the space of the Mediterranean. While Greeks and Turks say that the Mediterranean Sea does not occupy a significant place in their imagination, the Moroccan author Abd al-Magid Qadduri highlights how the sea, conceived as a distant and unknown element, commonly appears as a threat in Moroccan thought, whereas the land is the natural and comforting refuge.<sup>3</sup> The threat that the desert seems, from a Euro-Mediterranean perspective, to pose on the sea, is reversed here. As the desert narratives I will focus on also

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<sup>3</sup> See Barrada and Qadduri 2002.

reveal, the threat, within the desert, often comes from the sea, so that it becomes associated with the sea itself.

Dealing with ideas and images of the Mediterranean from a historical perspective, Salvatore Bono comments upon the results of the French project. Bono's own interpretation of Qadduri's thoughts is also interesting, as the Italian scholar attributes the Moroccan attitude towards the sea to the lack of a deep awareness and of a reflection on the Mediterranean, or, even more, to open hostility towards the Mediterranean idea.<sup>4</sup> Bono seems to completely gloss over the possibility that North African people might have a different relation – instead of no relation at all – with the Mediterranean as a whole; a Mediterranean that comprises both sea and land, or where the land, and the desert's land in particular, might even be another, not necessarily counter, sea. If, in other words, the desert is much more present, and important, than the sea within North African and Arab literary imagination, it also shares with the sea its most meaningful characteristics, being itself a space of continuous movement and change.

Given this dichotomy of, and apparent divide between, the sea and the desert across the various shores of the Mediterranean, it might be surprising to realize that the desert is not actually at the core of Arab literary production, or even of works that come from North African countries. The space that mostly occupies, and also significantly contributes to the characterization of, the modern and contemporary Arabic novel is instead the space of the city, which we have already seen playing an important role in Moghrabi's text. In the women of the wind's narratives, Tripoli stands in between the sea and the desert, opening towards the former while also connecting it to the latter. In this context, where "the Arabic novel has always been dominated by stories of the city," (Colla 188) it is even more significant when the desert does not only become the setting of, but also takes a specific role and a relevant meaning in works

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<sup>4</sup> See Bono 2008.

that belong to the Arabic literary world, as it does in both Al-Koni's novels and in Nasrallah's short story.

Elliott Colla notes how, in the specific context of Arabic literature, "the historical rise of the novel as an art form was directly linked with the marginalization of nomadic pastoralism as a key component of Arab civilization," so that "the very industrial era that enabled the one made the other obsolete." (Colla 189) This particular social and historical condition that lies behind the rise of the novel would, then, also explain why the novel itself tends to focus on the urban landscape, while apparently neglecting the significance of the desert within Arab culture as a whole. However, as we have seen in the case of Moghrabi's *Tripoli*, the city does not necessarily need to be seen as one, and the most distinctive, of Derrida and Guattari's striated space, and, as such, opposite to the smooth space of the sea. On the contrary, in the Libyan novel, the two spaces of the city and the sea tend toward each other, and the women of the wind's narrative points to the ultimate coincidence between the two. Even if, then, the form of the novel and the Western industrial revolution are somehow mutually entangled, this does not necessarily mean that non-Western narratives are unable to create the city as a space of resistance against the annihilating forces of capitalism.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, when the space of the city, in its association with the industrial society and modernization that Colla describes, gets replaced – as it does in Al-Koni's and Nasrallah's narratives – by the space of the desert, then the desert might itself become an alternative place of negotiation with global capitalism in the current post-industrial society. Within the contemporary non-Western literary imagination, in other words, the desert can become a space better suited than the city to respond to the movement of globalization coming from the West.

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<sup>5</sup> On the interrelation between historical and social condition of nineteenth century Britain and the rise of the novel see Ian Watt's classic study *The Rise of the Novel* (1957).

### Al-Koni's Local and Global Perspective

Within a North African literary context characterized, as we have seen, by the consistent prevalence of the urban landscape over the space of the desert, an explicit focus on the desert becomes particularly significant, as the choice of the setting itself necessarily carries an additional and specific meaning. It is, then, even more significant when, as in the case of the author I will mostly focus on in this chapter, the desert becomes the primary (and almost the sole) setting, and also somehow protagonist, of a whole literary world. Like Razan Moghrabi – the other North African writer I have introduced so far – Ibrahim Al-Koni is a Libyan author, or at least he is “categorized” as such in the global literary market. Contrary to Moghrabi's, however, Al-Koni's work has been widely circulated across the international literary market, as his novels and short stories have been translated into several languages.<sup>6</sup>

Al-Koni's identity is far more complex than the single term “Libyan” suggests and, more importantly here, it both affects and is affected by his own narrative of the desert. Born in Fezzan, the southwestern region of modern Libya, he was brought up on the tradition of the Tuareg, a nomadic Berber people who inhabit the Northern area of the Sahara. The writer left his homeland when he was still young, never to return. After obtaining his college degree in Comparative Literature at the Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow, he worked as a journalist first in Moscow and then in Warsaw, before moving, two decades ago, to Switzerland. Al-Koni's belonging to the Tuareg people, and his Libyan upbringing at the time in which the country had just gained its political independence, can partially explain the intention, evident throughout the writer's desert narratives, to transcend any given national affiliations. The

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<sup>6</sup> It is not easy to determine the reasons why Al-Koni still managed, nearly alone among his countrymen, to gain an unquestionable success beyond the Arab world. His ambiguous position as an Arab writer settled in Europe might have helped him to gain visibility in the Western context. Undoubtedly, several literary prizes awarded to him over the past twenty years have played a key role in the full accomplishment of his literary “consecration.” Al-Koni won, among others, the Libya State Award for Art and Literature in 1996, the Mohamed Zafzaf Award for Arabic Novel in 2005, the Shaik Zayad Book Award for Literature in 2008, and the Arab Novel Award in 2010.



Tuareg have their own culture and their own language, hence they represent a minority within the Libyan nation;<sup>7</sup> a nation that is itself a rather tenuous construct.

In the recent anthology *Arabic Literature: Postmodern Perspectives*, Al-Koni is included in the section “Polygamy of Place,” which explicitly refers to the conceptualization suggested by the sociologist Ulrich Beck. According to Beck, as a consequence of globalization, migrants can find themselves connected to “several places at once, belonging to different worlds,” (Beck 73) thus globalizing, in a way, their own biographies. Beck’s profile of the contemporary globalized human being can certainly be applied to Al-Koni, as the condition of displacement has informed his whole life. Apparently, the writer pushes his biographical condition of non-belonging even further, questioning any simplistic understanding of his own place of origin. It is not by chance that, as Meg Furniss Weisberg notes in her reading of Al-Koni’s *The Bleeding of the Stone*, “the word Libya appears nowhere in the novel,” (Weisberg 50) as the geopolitical construction of the nation is not relevant at all in the author’s own imagery. Significantly, when his novels were translated into German and published under the title *Novels from Libya*, the writer complained that Libya as a modern nation-state was by no means the origin of his work, and he managed to have the title changed to *Novels from the Sahara*. This episode reveals Al-Koni’s deep rejection of any national perspective, which could be interpreted as a further example of his “globalized” profile. At the same time, the choice of this new title also proves how central the Sahara desert is to the author’s literary imagery, as it replaces the nation itself.

Al-Koni’s biographical profile – as a writer who experiences the condition of multiple belongings within a globalized world – and the localized space of the Sahara desert he focuses

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<sup>7</sup> Most Tuareg people live in the Saharan region of Niger, Mali and Algeria, while smaller groups can be found in Libya, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. All tribes, however, constantly move across national borders, so that they cannot, and would not want to be identified with specific nations.

on almost exclusively in his work are only apparently contradictory. In this perspective, it is interesting to note that, in the introduction to the *Anchor Book of Modern Arabic Fiction*, Johnson-Davies includes Al-Koni within a category he himself constructs of Arab writers who “have no experience of the outside world.” (Johnson-Davies xix) With this assertion, the editor of the collection seems to completely ignore the writer’s own biographical experiences of migration and displacement.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, and perhaps with the intention to reinforce his own previous statement, Johnson-Davies presents Al-Koni as a writer who focuses “to good effect on a narrow and virtually unknown area of the Arab world, that of the Tuareg of North Africa.” (Johnson-Davies xx) Not only is this characterization of the setting of Al-Koni’s literary work inaccurate – since the area the Tuareg inhabit, which cuts across various North African countries, is quite large – but it also reveals a simplistic understanding of the author’s conception of the desert itself. The consistent use of the desert setting throughout Al-Koni’s novels cannot be only interpreted as resulting from the author’s need to restore a connection to his place of origin, in spite of his physical displacement. As the analysis of his novel(s) will make clear, Al-Koni’s narrative desert is a real and concrete space, and yet it is not a localized and impenetrable world in itself. As Rumiz’s Mediterranean island, Al-Koni’s Mediterranean desert embraces the apparent contradictions of its own geographical space, as it ultimately manages to be at once a global place of non-belonging and a local place where alternative belongings can be imagined.

A second, and also apparently contradictory, aspect of Al-Koni’s work, which is important to consider with respect to the Mediterranean narrative framework I propose in the whole dissertation, is the author’s linguistic predilection. Al-Koni’s choice to consistently write

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<sup>8</sup> In the light of the considerations I raised in the first chapter about the marginality of Libyan literature not only in the international literary market, but also within the smaller context of Arabic literature, it is noteworthy that in this relatively recent collection of short stories Ibrahim Al-Koni and Ahmad Faqih are the only two Libyan writers to appear among the eighty authors anthologized.

in Arabic implies the deliberate literary adoption of a language that he learned, since his mother tongue is the Tamasheq variety of the Tuareg's Berber language. Obviously, the use of Arabic allows the writer to address and reach a much larger audience than he would if writing in his mother tongue. At the same time, however, he consciously chooses Arabic over the other European languages he learned, and over English in particular, which would have immediately allowed the work to circulate in the Western world. In other words, Al-Koni seems to want neither to confine his work to the Tuareg world he comes from, nor to necessarily address it to the global world. Then, Al-Koni's linguistic choice also reflects the nature of his desert's space, which is neither localized nor globalized, or maybe it is both at the same time. The Arabic language gives the writer the opportunity to build and also innovate on a long literary tradition, as his own literary language "reads more like poetry than prose, with rhythms and resonances that have no correspondences outside of the language." (Colla 167) At the same time, his linguistic choice allows the author to move in the in-between space that Arabic language inhabits, caught in the dialectic between the Tuareg's local language and global English. Since, ultimately, the Arab world itself is commonly positioned at the margins within the framework of the global linguistic and literary world, Al-Koni's choice manages to reject the dichotomy not only between local and global, but also between margin and center, problematizing the relation between the two poles. In the same way as Al-Koni's narrative moves the Sahara desert from its localized and apparently marginal position to the center of a Mediterranean and global literary world, Al-Koni's Arabic is ultimately a language that, from its own supposedly marginal position, reclaims its centrality both within the Mediterranean and in the larger world.

### Al-Koni's Narrative Desert

In this chapter I will focus on Al-Koni's acclaimed novel *The Bleeding of the Stone*, while also providing some references to his previous novel *Gold Dust*, as their parallel reading illuminates fundamental aspects of Al-Koni's desert narrative. At the end of the chapter, I will provide a reading of Nasrallah's short story *The Desert*, which also focuses on the real and metaphorical space of the Sahara. Coming from a different country and a different area of the Mediterranean, the story nevertheless creates a similar narrative of the desert to the one Al-Koni develops in his work. This coincidence points to the centrality of the desert itself – as both parallel and opposite to the sea – within the larger Mediterranean space. Through their own focalization on the space of the desert, Al-Koni's and Nasrallah's narratives are capable of creating a Mediterranean desert that resonates with the Mediterranean Sea, as it emerged through the narratives I analyzed in the previous chapters. Al-Koni's and Nasrallah's Sahara is a real and imaginary space at the same time. It is a localized, and yet also potentially global space, a periphery that becomes a center, and that, as Rumiz's and Sedira's space of the lighthouse, requires interactions and bonds between humans and non-humans. The narrative desert Al-Koni and Nasrallah create is both a threat and a possibility, an endangered but not defenseless space, and as such it is constantly suspended in a condition between life and death – like Shauba's sea and Rumiz's island.

The *Bleeding of the Stone* tells the story of the young Bedouin Asouf, who lives in the mountainous Sahara desert, in southern Libya. He has been put in charge of guarding ancient rock paintings that many foreigners regularly visit and worship. As a depositary of the desert's secrets, he also knows where to find the *waddan*, a sort of mythical moufflon that, together with the gazelle, is the “spirit” of the desert, while being at the same time famous for the particular quality of his meat. After Cain, a hunter who has already exterminated the gazelle population,

asks Asouf to guide him to the waddan, the Bedouin will ultimately sacrifice his own life rather than surrender to the hunter's request. *Gold Dust* also focuses on a Tuareg Saharan nomad, Ukhayyad, and in particular on his enduring, while also troubled, bond with a piebald camel, who appears to be his closest, and his only true friend and companion. The hardship and challenges that the man and the animal have to face throughout the story sanctions the ultimately impossible break of their bond.

As I already mentioned, the choice of the desert as the privileged setting of his whole literary world immediately allows Al-Koni to reject any national perspective. The Sahara the Tuareg inhabit, although not entirely free from a geopolitical demarcation of space – since it inevitably overlaps with national territories – does not ultimately coincide with any nation. On the contrary, the Sahara is defined by the constant movement across superimposed political borders on the national territory. However, Al-Koni's desert carries a meaning that goes far beyond its already significant transnational characterization. The Sahara is not a mere setting for the writer's stories; instead, it provides them with an essential dimension, which ultimately shapes them. As Glissant argues in his *Caribbean Discourse* in order to stress the peculiar relation of the Martinican community with its land and the representation of this relation in literature, "landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and inscribes itself as constituent of being. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are indissociable in the constitutive episode of their history. Landscape is a character in this history. It must be understood in its depths." (Glissant 255) In the same way, Al-Koni's desert space is a character, and one of the main characters, within the stories.

If, then, the desert is not an accessory backdrop in Al-Koni's narratives, what more specific function does it serve? Many of Al-Koni's critics tend to define the writer's desert as an essentially metaphorical and symbolic space, characterized by mythological and sacred

dimensions. Fiona Moolla reads some of Al-Koni's novels as purely allegorical, and explicitly describes the desert within them as a "symbol" and a "sacred order."<sup>9</sup> Writing about the representation of the desert in Silko's *Ceremony* and in Al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone*, Jehan Farouk Fouad and Saeed Alwakeel note how in both novels "the physical is transformed into an existential realm in which ontological and epistemological questions about human existence are raised. The desert is depicted in both works as a timeless microcosm." (Fouad and Alwakeel 39) It is certainly true that the temporal framework of Al-Koni's novel is confusing. The whole story is clearly set in the first half of the twentieth century, and yet, the scattered temporal references and the continuous flashbacks make it difficult not only to date precisely the development of the present-time and main story, but also to rearrange the chronological order of the different narrated events.

The uncertainty over the chronological dimension of the story, however, does not necessarily turn the desert into a "timeless microcosm." Asouf's present story does develop within the desert space that witnesses it, but the development itself does not seem to follow a linear trajectory, and is continuously complicated and delayed through the insertion of multiple fragments of the Bedouin's own past. Thus, it is not that Al-Koni's desert has no temporal dimension, or that Asouf's story, supposedly suspended in a mythical, and unhistorical, framework, carries a mere symbolic meaning. Rather, the story set in the desert adjusts to the pace of the desert itself, adopting a nomadic movement that progresses in waves, with no center and no linear direction. The time of the desert, in other words, both determines and is determined by the narrative time of the story.

A few precise references also allow the reader to at least identify the broad time frame of the novel. At the beginning of the story, Asouf recalls how his father had lost his connection

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<sup>9</sup> See Moolla 2015.

with the people from the oases, “since news had spread that the Italians had invaded their shores, with plans to penetrate south into the desert.” (*The Bleeding* 24) Later in the text, there is a reference to a detention camp in which the Italian Captain Bordello is gathering young men from the oases “to train them for the invasion of Abyssinia.” (*The Bleeding* 67) Towards the end of the novel, a new character enters the story: an American marine, John Parker, who is said to have gone to North Africa to study Sufism in 1957. Parker is introduced in the novel as he goes hunting with Cain, at a narrative time that must be close to the present time of Asouf’s own interaction with Cain. Thus, the whole novel covers quite a large historical span, which goes from the first rumors of the Italian invasion to a time in which Libya has already gained its political independence. It is interesting to note that the only three occurrences, within the whole novel, of a precise time setting, all relate to the presence, in the space of the Sahara, of foreign people. In the first two cases, these people come from the sea, the same Mediterranean Sea that seems at time to bring threats to the safe desert’s land. Clearly, the two references belong to two different moments of the Italian colonial campaign – the first invasion of Libya in 1911 and Mussolini’s Ethiopian War of 1935, respectively –, but they both testify to its impact on the Bedouin population. Parker, on the other hand, is a captain at an American military base, and his presence in the novel inevitably recalls the strategic use of the Libyan desert at the time of the Cold War.

Within this space, which can then only erroneously appear as a timeless desert, there are actually two different times that interact with and influence each other. There is a “natural” time, which is the time of the desert and of Asouf’s story within it, the time that sustains the desert narrative itself. There is also, in the background, a “colonial” time, which is the historical time of the Libyan territory, of its occupation by, and struggle against, the Italians, and of its prolonged exploitation by foreign powers. The two times necessarily coexist in the novel and

share the same desert's space. However, they do move at different paces, as the former keeps putting in place a resistance, and offering an alternative, to the latter, which, however, must not be forgotten, but rather constantly acknowledged. Even better, the nomadic and rhizomatic movement of the desert's time resists the threat of immobility that colonization's time brings about, since, as David Atkinson argues, colonial domination in Libya rested on control of indigenous' mobility.<sup>10</sup>

Not only has the desert's space, in which the whole story develops, a concrete temporal and historical dimension, but it is also a real geographical and physical entity. In their study of Silko's and Al-Koni's novels, Fouad and Alwakeel note that even though "the vitality and immediacy of physical space are usually celebrated in desert writing" (and they explicitly define Al-Koni's novel as a desert novel) "yet, in many cases, the physical transcends the limits of the topographical, pointing to other realms, meanings, beings." (Fouad and Alwakeel 40) Once again, this interpretation of the desert's role in *The Bleeding of the Stone* runs the risk of overestimating the metaphorical dimension of the space to the detriment of its physical reality. In Al-Koni's novel, the Sahara is first of all a very specific geographical space, whose material identity the author does not want to undermine in any way.

Al-Koni's characterization of the desert in geographical terms is indeed so precise as to justify Colla's remark that "some of the references have little meaning beyond their original context." (Colla 167) If it is true that most of the references to the Sahara's various spaces are not transparent, especially for a Western reader, then the author's choice to use them recurrently within the novel is even more significant. The "most prominent rock" that Asouf is in charge of

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<sup>10</sup> See Atkinson 2000. On this question of mobility in the colony, Pamela Ballinger shows how, in the end, Italian colonial efforts to sedentarize people in Libya were directed to both Libyans and Italian settlers, as, in the fascist regime's intentions, agricultural settlements in Libya were intended to transform Italian "nomads" into proper Italian (See Ballinger 2016). In this respect, then, it is also interesting to note that the distinction that Al-Koni draws in his desert narrative between indigenous people and colonists, nomads and settlers, Libyans and Italians, is never sharp and clear-cut, so that the human realm as a whole does not rely on a binary opposition between good and evil.



guarding (and that plays a key role in the narrative of the Bedouin's death) stands at the edge of the Wadi Matkhandoush, where it meets with the Wadi Aynesis, which in turn ultimately merges into the Massak Mallat.<sup>11</sup> (*The Bleeding* 2) The plains and the mountain recur several times in the novel, together with other spaces, such as the Red Hamada plateau and the oases of "the Wadi Aajal, or Ghat, or Uwaynat, or Marzouq." (*The Bleeding* 24) Even though the single spaces might be unknown to the reader, they do allow Al-Koni to present the desert as a local space, which has a real and specific reference in the actual world. At the same time, by mentioning precise locations within – and different areas of – the desert, Al-Koni also articulates the complexity of the whole space of the Sahara, hence counteracting a stereotypical image of it as an endless expanse of sand, a blank land.<sup>12</sup> Al-Koni's desert comprises the plains, the oases that lie within them, and the mountains, as Bedouins and animals constantly move and interact with each other across these different spaces, in what Deleuze and Guattari define as the rhizomatic structure of the Eastern imaginary, derived from "a relation to the steppe and the garden (or in some cases the desert and the oasis)."<sup>13</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 18) Depicted as such, the desert refuses again any characterization of emptiness, stillness, immobility, and backwardness that a Western perspective might apply to it.

Moreover, Al-Koni's Sahara is not the exotic desert romanticized by generations of Western travelers; a space that, in spite of the physical challenges it poses, becomes "an ideal for raw nature [...] imbued with interesting aesthetic values." (Hamarneh 87) Fouad and Alwakeel point out how the desert somehow represents, in the Western imaginary, the quintessence of exoticism, both in itself and in relation to the people who live in it: "deserts

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<sup>11</sup> In the English translation of the book, the Arabic terms are preserved.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of the Western construction of the whole African continent as an empty space see Miller 1985.

<sup>13</sup> I am aware that Deleuze and Guattari's binary categorization of the West (as related to the tree and the forest), as opposed to the East (as related to the steppe and the garden), is problematic. I use it here, however, to highlight the movement that the space of the desert does imply, contrary to a common conception of it as immobile and backward.

have always intrigued writers and artists from east and west with their magnificence, spirituality and exoticism. Inhabitants of the desert have long fascinated interested researchers for being reclusive and mysterious, though simultaneously dynamic.” (Fouad and Alwakeel 39) However, the desert that comes out of Al-Koni’s narrative is not a fascinating entity ready to attract and fulfill Western orientalism.<sup>14</sup>

As Walid Hamarneh suggests in his study of the different meanings the desert assumes for different people, for those who, instead, live close to it, the desert’s more tangible and pressing aspects are its aridity and its threat to human existence. (Hamarneh 88) In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, the threatening character of the desert is emphasized, so that the Sahara appears not only as a real geographical space, but also as a menacing physical entity. The desert manifests itself in the harshness of everyday life, imposing on its inhabitants a perpetual struggle for adaptation to its daily challenges and dangers. In the opening scene of the novel, the young Bedouin Asouf, while looking for an unruly goat of his herd, witnesses the sunset, when the sun sinks “slowly down from the depths of the sky as it bade farewell, with the threat to return next morning and finish burning what it hadn’t burned today.” (*The Bleeding* 1) Making its triumphant entrance into the novel, the desert brings the endless threat of water scarcity, which is its most evident, and frightening, characteristic. Asouf tries in vain to take refuge from the “cruelly beating sun” under a palm tree, since even the tree soon abandons him, “stealing its shade away.” (*The Bleeding* 6)

Ultimately, Al-Koni’s desert is a concrete space that retains its own temporal and spatial coordinates, and that also contributes to determining the narrative development of the stories that happen within its space. In his interpretation of Al-Koni’s literary world – published in the

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<sup>14</sup> The link between the desert as a literary setting and orientalism as a misleading representation of the Arab world constructed in the West has a long history and is still present, as the recent book by Hsu-Ming Teo, *Desert passions: Orientalism and romance novels*, deeply explores.

context of a recent study of the Saharan trade as a fundamental socio-economic and cultural bridge in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – Elliot Colla asserts that “the focus of his [Al-Koni’s] novels is not the Saharan desert itself, but rather the lives of desert dwellers as they struggle against natural, social, and spiritual forces beyond their control.” (Colla 188) Here the scholar seems to suggest not only that the geographical space of the desert is simply instrumental to the Tuareg’s stories that develop in it, but also that the two dimensions of the “natural” space and the human agency need to be seen as somehow in contrast with each other. On the contrary, as the reading of specific passages of the novels will show, characters and landscape are mutually implicated, to the point that one defines the other and vice versa. As Elmusa puts it, in her reading of Al-Koni’s novel, “place and narrative intermingle, moving the story forward,” (Elmusa 12) so that the desert ultimately dis(orient)s the narrative itself.

#### The In-between-ness of the Desert Passage

Survival in the desert is necessarily linked to water supply, which is by definition scarce and unreliable, so that the Bedouins constantly live under a mortal threat. In *Gold Dust*, Al-Koni highlights the precariousness of the Tuareg’s life in the face of water shortage, and this very precariousness adds a further level of realism to the writer’s whole conception of the desert: “Without water, miracles cannot take place in the desert. Even when a miracle does occur, the absence of water erases it, transforming it into mere illusion. Without water, the whole world becomes a fantasy. What good is it to have your health back if you lack water? Life draws near, but so too does death.” (*Gold Dust* 45) More precisely, then, the threat that the Bedouins constantly face within the space of Al-Koni’s narrative desert leaves them suspended in a liminal space between life and death, since life can only be experienced, in the desert, through the proximity of death. As one of the wise men of the tribe tells Ukhayyad, the protagonist of

*Gold Dust*: “Just as sorrow follows happiness, so too does death intrude into the foolishness of life.” (*Gold Dust* 18) In the never ending crossing of the desert’s space that defines the Bedouins’ life, as in the migrants’ Mediterranean crossing that Prosa and Moghrabi give voice to, death is always inscribed within life, since boundaries between the two are thin and uncertain.

In the attempt to cure his piebald camel from the merciless mange that is consuming the animal’s body, Ukhayyad finds himself “perched between consciousness and oblivion, in that interval between life and death.” (*Gold Dust* 49) In the original Arabic, this space, which is also a non-space by virtue of its own indeterminacy, is called “al-barzakh.” It is a word that Al-Koni repeatedly uses to indicate this kind of liminal space, and whose complex concept in Arabic language Elliott Colla explains in the *Afterword* of *Gold Dust*:

While commonly translated as ‘obstacle’, or ‘separation’, this Qur’anic word has rich resonances – referring to the interval separating this world from the hereafter, or heaven from hell. For Sufis, its meaning is broader, referring to a point between light and darkness, spirit and matter, the animate and the inanimate. This space is not purgatory in the Christian sense, but the realm that the spirit passes through as it transcends bodily forms.” (Colla 170)

The word, then, seems to describe the same suspended condition that, in Prosa’s play, Shauba experiences on the verge of drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, where she could “neither live nor die.” And it is the same condition that ultimately allows and sustains the woman’s whole narrative, or rather the resistance of her narrative efforts against the threats of immobility and death.

Similarly, in Al-Koni's narrative this unresolved condition of liminal suspension allows the Bedouin protagonist who experiences it to acknowledge, and face, the challenges that life in the desert carries, and to imagine ways to address them from within. In the long run after the camel – who has temporarily lost any residual control, only driven by the pain that the process of healing is causing him – Ukhayyad's eyes "had lost their ability to see [...] perhaps because he had lingered so long in the interval between this world and the hereafter." (*Gold Dust* 50)

And yet, the very in-between space also provides the Bedouin with an alternative way of looking at things, which manifests in his effort to resist a persisting threat of annihilation. This threat materializes, not by chance, in the same risk of falling into the abyss – and of being consequently reduced to silence – that haunts Shauba's real and narrative Mediterranean passage. At the end of his fierce struggle with the camel in an attempt to calm him down, Ukhayyad needs to descend into a well in order to get the water necessary to his own survival. The very interval "between the stone lip of the well and the water below" (*Gold Dust* 51) becomes then the crucial time and space of the Bedouin's physical and narrative resistance, of his efforts not to fall into the abyss, but rather to endure in the suspended space that is the only one available to him.

This real and narrative experience of the liminal space extends temporarily, so that "a fraction of a second" becomes "an entire lifetime," (*Gold Dust* 51) where, in other words, the present moment recovers its link to the past and opens itself up to the possibility of a future. At the same time, the liminal space of physical and narrative suspension can extend its own spatial coordinates to comprise the whole space of the Mediterranean, from the desert to the sea and back to the desert again. As Ukhayyad remembers the Sheikh's saying that death is "closer than your jugular vein and yet farther than the ends of the earth," (*Gold Dust* 50) he fully inhabits

this enlarged space of a physical and narrative agency; an agency that sometimes can only be exercised (as in Prosa's case) on the very "continuous moment" of plunging into the abyss.

In the English versions of Al-Koni's novels the Arabic term "al-barzakh" is translated as "no man's land," (*Gold Dust* 49) a concept that historically refers to the land that is unoccupied, being disputed by different entities. What does it mean to be a no man's land for this in-between space that Al-Koni's characters inhabit at different stages? What kind of land, then, is the narrative desert that Al-Koni imagines, and in which he places his Tuareg community?

Although the desert Al-Koni creates in his narrative is not a space deprived of human presence, it is also true that, as Elmusa suggests, the desert "is a place with specific geographical details that molds its inhabitants, who, in turn, inscribe their identities and values on the landscape" (Elmusa 10) and learn how to carry on their lives in spite of the difficulties they involve. In other words, Al-Koni's desert as a whole can be seen as a no man's land insofar as the man who lives in it cannot simply claim possession of it, but rather has to adjust to the other elements with which he shares this space.

This form of co-existence and co-habitation that Al-Koni's desert relies upon also explains why resistance in the desert, against the threats that the desert itself implies, involves both humans and non-humans. The enduring resistance that Ukhayyad has to put up in *Gold Dust*, in the narrative desert of *The Bleeding of the Stone* extends to the natural and animal realms. It is a resistance that often translates into the very rhizomatic movement of the desert – which, as I said, both influences and is influenced by the rhizomatic movement of the narrative itself – where nomadic life applies not only to the human beings, but also to the animals: "Everything abandons the desert as summer draws near, leaving the wilderness to struggle with mirage and silence, and with the sun's rays." (*The Bleeding* 114) But it is also a resistance that takes place within the very space of the desert, where, in spite of the persisting drought, "wild

grass clung on between the stones, surrounded, here and there, by smooth tongues of sand.”<sup>15</sup> (*The Bleeding* 115) Al-Koni does not, in the end, depict desert’s life as an idyllic communion with nature, but rather as a mutual adjustment between humans and non-humans, which requires effort and endless compromises on both sides.

In the *Bleeding of the Stone*, there are two key episodes through which Al-Koni narrates a form of resistance that happens again in the in-between state, in a suspended condition where the boundaries between the human and the animal get significantly blurred. This liminal state that many of Al-Koni’s characters experience is, in Agamben’s thoughts, the very condition of a passage from inside to outside, which never gets fully realized. On the contrary, Al-Koni’s desert’s characters remain suspended on a threshold that, in Agamben’s own words, “is not another thing with respect to the limit; it is, so to speak, the experience of the limit itself, the experience of being-*within* an *outside*.” (Agamben 1993: 68) And it is this experience of the threshold that allows for a space of resistance, by virtue of its own unresolved condition of passage from potentiality to act.

The first episode portrays Asouf’s fight with the charmed waddan, which occupies a long flashback section within the main story. Before moving to the analysis of the episode, however, it is important to address the complex dimension that Al-Koni’s conception, and his own narrative, of the relation between the human and the waddan takes in *The Bleeding of the Stone*. The human-waddan relationship develops throughout the whole novel, establishing a link among the different human characters, thus also somehow determining the development of the story itself. Asouf’s father, Asouf himself, and Cain, at different times within the novel, all hunt the waddan, and engage in meaningful fights with the animal. And yet, the outcome of their

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<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that this narrative image of the grass that keeps reclaiming its space among the desert’s sand resembles a scene from Sedira’s *Floating Coffins* that I analyzed in the previous chapter, as one example of powerful moments of relief from – and resistance against – the overarching negative narrative of the video installation.

hunts, and the relationship they ultimately establish with the waddan himself, proves to be very different.

In order to feed his family during a desert's drought, Asouf's father has to kill the waddan, thus breaking a vow he made when the waddan saved his life. What emerges, however, from the man's narrative of the struggle (as he tells his son Asouf about it) is the fierce resistance that the animal puts up. The waddan surrenders only when he realizes he cannot escape the man's rifle, as he is trapped in the plain, far from his mountainous shelter. Also, the animal refuses to be actually killed by the man, but rather kills himself by breaking his own neck. Even after the waddan's death, as Asouf's father recalls, "his eyes were still open and that strange look was still there – the mixture of wretchedness and rancor and helplessness." (*The Bleeding* 20) Even though, in other words, the man technically wins his battle against the animal, the narrative of the fight reveals a different scenario. Not only is Asouf's father somehow guilty of breaking his own vow with the waddan, but the waddan's persistent look also bears witness to his resistance, even beyond the space of his own life, against the man's arbitrary change of the desert's rules.

I will come back later to the extreme consequences that arise from Cain's appetite for the waddan's meat, as they play a key role in the final turn of the story, thus orienting the meaning of the novel as a whole. Here I will just note that Cain's carelessness for the rules of the desert extends far beyond Asouf's father's failure to fulfill his vow. If one of the first lessons Asouf learns about the desert concerns the practice of hunting, which is obviously a matter of survival for a pastoral and nomadic people, he also needs to learn how to do it properly, showing respect for nature's life cycle. As he himself recalls, "although there were plenty of gazelles in the desert then, his father had made a strict rule never to hunt more than one gazelle each trip. That way, he maintained, the soul of the gazelle would become stronger



and firmer.” (*The Bleeding* 37) Cain, however, whose only interest in the desert lies in hunting both the gazelles and the fascinating waddan, has “little thought for the rules of nature.” (88) He reacts with surprise and rage when, after the advent of technology in the form of more advanced weapons Americans have brought to the desert, the supply of meat becomes scarce. Here Al-Koni shows what Elmusa defines as “environmental concerns,” (Elmusa 11) since he provides an evident allusion to the deep implications of a thoughtless intervention on nature, where again danger and loss affect nature and human beings alike. Although it is not a defenseless entity that needs to be preserved, the desert still requires a form of respect, as, in Elmusa’s terms, it “is more complex and rich an ecology than the term ‘desertification’ implies.” (Elmusa 12) Cain poses a threat to a desert that, as Hamarneh notes, “represents the culture of scarcity [...] a challenge to the dominant urban and rural conceptions of progress and abundance associated with modernity.” (Hamarneh 87) This does not mean, however, that the desert must be conceived as a backward space, immobile in its stubborn defense of tradition, and opposed to modernity as a whole. As it emerges from Al-Koni’s narrative, the Sahara desert, rather than being itself just a threat, becomes a space where answers to inside and outside threats can be imagined.

In the *Bleeding of the Stone*, Al-Koni’s narrative creates the desert as an alternative space of resistance through the figure of the protagonist Asouf, and, more precisely, through the narrative development of his relationship with the desert and the waddan. Asouf’s relationship with the desert he inhabits is instinctive, as if shaped by unwritten laws that guide his own behavior within the “no man’s land.” At the beginning of the novel, in one of the many flashbacks through which the meandering narrative develops, the young Bedouin recalls the time when the men from the Archeological Department visited the area and made him the guardian of the ancient rocks in the Wadi Matkhandoush. The department official warns the

Bedouin about the seriousness of the task, since, in his own words, “these paintings are our country’s pride.” (*The Bleeding* 8) Asouf, however, does not share the man’s national perspective, as he does not feel he belongs to a country whose borders have no concrete meaning in his life. He accepts the task only because it does not imply any change in his own attitude towards the desert itself, but he refuses the monthly payment offered for the “job.”<sup>16</sup> This gesture of rejecting the money can be seen as a form of denial of any external authority over the desert’s land, and, at the same time, a refusal to acknowledge the monetary value of the desert itself. Through the figure of the Bedouin who “would not know what to do with the money,” (*The Bleeding* 9) Al-Koni narrates the desert as a space that does not rely on capital. On the contrary, Al-Koni’s narrative desert gives value to non-monetary forms of social interaction, which in turn allow for the creation of bonds that extend beyond the realm of the humans.

One of these bonds links Asouf to the waddan. The bond, however, does not come easily and without a price. It is only after, and by virtue of, the crucial episode of the fight between the man and the animal that the bond is established. It is a fight in which the boundaries are so blurred that it is not clear, in the end, “which of them was the victim, which the executioner [...] which of them was human, which animal,” (*The Bleeding* 60) as they reciprocally learn how to coexist and interact with each other. The fight, then, embodies a kind of desert’s rite of passage, parallel to Shauba’s sea passage. Significantly, the passage happens in a long and suspended time, and in the same no man’s land that Ukhayyad occupies during his struggle with

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<sup>16</sup> Asouf remembers the old Italian who accompanied these men in their visit to the *wadi*, and stresses how differently he behaved from the other men in terms of respect both for him and for the place. He is also significantly described as completely at ease with the landscape and its features, since “all day long he leaped among the rocks, just like the unruly young goats” (*The Bleeding* 8). When he reappears later in the novel, Asouf finally explains why he felt that this man was different from the others, namely because he loved the desert. This figure makes it clear how Al-Koni does not want to draw a clear-cut line between good and evil, Westerners and non-Westerners, Christians and Muslims, local people and foreigners. Italians are obviously the colonizers, the echo of whose fighting comes from the northern shores to the inner desert, but they can also appreciate and respect the desert more than local people would do, as the case of Cain demonstrates.

the camel. Once again, as in both Shauba's/Icarus' and Ukhayyad's cases, the threat here takes the form of the abyss, in which the Bedouin is afraid of falling, but which at the same time allows for the suspended time of his physical and narrative resistance.

Similarly to Shauba on the surface of the Mediterranean Sea, here Asouf, hanging from a rock at the top of a mountain where the waddan has dragged him, is trapped in a physical immobility, which can only bring exhaustion and pain. However, the struggle endures in the in-between space, "between earth and heaven," (*The Bleeding* 51) where the Bedouin has the time, and the chance, to narrate his own "immobile movement" of resistance. Although the whole novel is in fact narrated in the third person, this episode (as many others in the novel) focuses on Asouf's own point of view. Thus, the long narrative passage ultimately develops as a kind of monologue in which, once again similarly to Shauba, the man gives voice to his resistance through a polyphonic articulation of his own narrative. Within the incessant movement of his thoughts and questions to himself ("How had this happened? [...] Was this his grave then? Was it the end? [...] Was he going to die then? Did death come so easily? [...] What was he waiting for?" *The Bleeding* 48-52), the long narrative passage of Asouf's suspended state is also sustained by the recurrent intrusion of formulaic and gnomic sentences, which seem to deliver the voice of the desert itself: "There are no miracles in the desert. If you fall into the trap, you have to get out alone; and, if you can't, you have to face your destiny with courage. [...]" "A man's strength isn't in his body. It's in his heart." (*The Bleeding* 52-55) As Cozzo explains in her comparative study of Paul Bowles' and Ibrahim Al-Koni's works, in Al-Koni's novels "the narrator adheres to the rules of the desert that seems to have its own army of saints and prophets who preserve its aphorisms."<sup>17</sup> (Cozzo 147) These aphorisms, through which the desert

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<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that Cozzo develops her intuition about the desert's voice in Al-Koni's novels in the opposite direction to my own reading. After acknowledging the intrusion of the desert's voice within the main narrative voices, she also states that "as a caravan crossing the desert, in the majority of Al-Koni's fiction, the

expresses itself, accompany Asouf in the time/space of his suspension over the dreadful pit. As “no whisper and no movement” (*The Bleeding* 58) surround him, and the sun sets so that “darkness and silence were crueler than the chasm,” (*The Bleeding* 55) this composite narrative voice allows the Bedouin to resist the threat of silence and immobility.

Mixing his own voice with the voice of the desert, Asouf gets somehow confounded with, and becomes, the desert itself, as the boundaries between the man and the space that surrounds him – while also sustaining his own struggle – blur. In this perspective, Asouf’s fear of his own death translates into the fear of the desert’s disappearance: “Everything would vanish. The eternal desert would disappear.” (*The Bleeding* 59) However, as it happened to Mahama in the last play of Prosa’s trilogy, resistance might lie in the very movement of “appearing and disappearing,” where, in Asouf’s case, the threat of disappearing gives him the necessary strength to endure, both physically and narratively, until he can finally reappear.

Asouf’s “reappearance,” namely his resurfacing from the abyss upon which he has long been hanging, coincides with a further blurring of the human boundaries, which this time involves the waddan. The animal saves Asouf from the pit, dragging him back from the hanging rock, “in the darkness of the early dawn.” (*The Bleeding* 60) Through this darkness that obstructs his sight, the Bedouin can still, however, see “his father in the eyes of the great, patient waddan.” (*The Bleeding* 61) Not only, in this episode – as in the whole of Al-Koni’s literary world – are the characters and the space of the desert interdependent, but also the human and the animal blend to the point that they cannot be separated. Through the multiple instances of what Susan Mchugh defines as “hybrid species,” Al-Koni narrates the “ongoing threat constituted by nomad forms that makes the perseverance of the Tuareg not simply like,

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narrative movement is linear moving towards the aim and giving no space for repetition, which is often considered as the predominant poetic style in modern Arabic literature.” On the contrary, as I already pointed out, the narrative movement of Al-Koni’s novel is neither linear nor circular, but rather nomadic and rhyzomatic, as the narrative structure adjusts to the desert’s own disorienting movement.

but also bound to that of the waddan, the gazelles, the camels, and all those adapted to desert life together.” (Mchugh 297) If, in the episode of *Gold Dust* I referred to earlier, Ukhayyad shares his camel’s healing process and the dangers that come with it, in *The Bleeding of the Stone* Asouf and the waddan’s struggle against each other does not ultimately drive them apart, but rather creates the possibility for their conciliation. In other words, the “cross-species intimacy”, in Mchugh terms, that the desert allows in the narrative space of Al-Koni’s novels calls for a shared effort, where humans and animals together resist to the common threat posed to their mobility.

Escaping a fall into the pit, however, does not mean that Asouf has quite overcome the threat, as the darkness that envelops him prolongs his immobility. Even when the scorching sun comes back in the morning, he is still “lost in mist darkness,” (*The Bleeding* 63) hence in the same obscurity of sight that both Shauba and Rumiz experience in their Mediterranean nights on the sea. If Shauba lacked land, a land that she could not ultimately reach, here Asouf lacks water, as the thirst obfuscates his vision. It is as if Shauba’s and Asouf’s suspended narratives are also able to create a suspended link between sea and land, as the two elements reaffirm their complementarity within the larger space of the Mediterranean. In order to see through the darkness, or better, in Agamben’s terms, to take advantage of this very darkness so as to “firmly hold his gaze on his own time,” (Agamben 2009: 44) patience is not enough. Similarly to Rumiz’s donkey/Cyclops, not only is Al-Koni’s protagonist here required not to give up, but he also needs to put in place a further, “mighty effort” (*The Bleeding* 64) of resistance. And this effort translates into mobility, as Asouf manages to make “a desperate progress, a final move,” (*The Bleeding* 64) which eventually allows him to reach the little reserve of water he had dropped before the beginning of the fight. It is movement, once again, that “now decided life or death.” (*The Bleeding* 64) And it is the same movement, within “a third state neither void nor

existence,” (*The Bleeding* 64) that has already allowed Shauba’s narrative resistance on the verge of drowning in the sea’s abyss.

Contrary to Shauba, however, Asouf is ultimately (though temporarily) successful not only in his narrative, but also in his physical resistance, as he survives the fight with the waddan and goes back to his mother. Asouf’s mother, who seems to play a minor role in the novel – especially when compared to the figure of the father, to which I will come back later –, is nevertheless the protagonist of the second of the two episodes I mentioned earlier, where resistance happens again in an in-between space of suspension. While Asouf is away in the pastures, his mother is surprised in the plain by a sudden flooding, and drowns in the torrent of water created by the heavy rain coming from the mountains. Asouf’s mother’s resistance, then, closely resembles Shauba’s, as both women have to physically surrender to the natural force of a water that they cannot contain. At the same time, in this episode of Al-Koni’s novel as already in Prosa’s play, the physical death of the woman does not erase the potential meaning of her own gesture of resistance.

In his “immobile journey” within the space of a Mediterranean island, Rumiz already noticed how, in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, “the weather changes at an astonishing speed,” (Rumiz 73) at a rhythm with which humans are unable to keep up. The same condition of sudden and unexpected alterations applies to the Sahara, which once again, in Al-Koni’s narrative, shares with the sea some of its most distinctive characteristics. Neither visual nor auditory elements had made Asouf aware of the imminent danger, as he “had noticed no lighting, heard no remote rumbling of thunder.” (*The Bleeding* 69) And yet, he knows that “man in the desert has to die by one of those two opposites: flood or thirst,” (*The Bleeding* 69) where the paradox is only apparent. As we have already seen, in Al-Koni’s narrative world, life in the desert is inextricably tied to the presence – or the absence – of water. Thus, the Mediterranean

desert that the writer narratively creates continuously reaffirms its parallel relation to, and its bond with, the Mediterranean Sea, as the two elements of land and water constantly show their interdependence.

Contrary to Asouf, then, who, in the episode I analyzed previously, eventually manages to reach his source of water and avoid dying of thirst, Asouf's mother gets swept away by the floods with such violence that, upon his return, Asouf can only find her scattered remains across the wadi. However, the narrative passage of Asouf's discovery reveals a peculiar display of the woman's remains, which still testifies to her enduring resistance. In particular, "the right hand was still clinging on to the thorns of an acacia [...] the bony fingers still clung on stubbornly," (*The Bleeding* 68) as the old woman struggled to resist the fury of the water stream. The tenacious grip on the plant significantly resonates with Shauba's long-lasting grip on her sunglasses, the only object meant to be present on stage in Prosa's play. Moreover, while "the right eye had gone, ripped away by the stones on the savage journey [...] the other eye was shining, staring up at the sky," (*The Bleeding* 67) so that Asouf's mother's resistance also resembles the strong endurance of the half-blind old donkey in Rumiz's narrative island. The old woman, in other words, is a further narrative example of Rumiz's Cyclops, as she keeps looking ahead with her only eye even after her physical death. The space in which this resistance takes place is, not by chance, the same "third state, between life and death, being and void," (*The Bleeding* 68) that Asouf had already experienced in his struggle with the waddan.<sup>18</sup> And it is this suspended space that, in Al-Koni's as in Prosa's narrative, is most valued even against the ultimate annihilation of death. As Al-Koni highlights, "between life and death was a space from which a creature could return to life, or else cross over into death," (*The Bleeding*

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<sup>18</sup> It is also interesting to note that a few details in the description of the mother's remains seem to point to a blurring of the boundaries between the human and the animal that had already characterized Asouf's fight with the waddan. In particular, a lock of his mother's silver hair that Asouf finds on a bush alludes to the same silver hairs Asouf had noticed on the waddan while struggling against the animal.

68) and the remains of Asouf's mother, scattered across the plain, bear witness and give value to this potentially infinite state (and space) of suspension.

It is interesting to note, then, that in Al-Koni's narrative, as in Prosa's dramatic monologue, it is the threat of drowning that is able to activate an ultimate gesture of resistance. If this threat necessarily informs the condition of the migrant in her middle passage across the Mediterranean Sea, it might appear less tangible if applied to the condition of a Bedouin in the Sahara. However, Al-Koni's characters appear to show an ambiguity towards water that once again, might be linked to the threatening character of the Mediterranean sea itself. If water, in the arid condition of desert's life, is necessarily the most valuable resource, at the same time it also seems, somehow paradoxically, to represent a real threat within Al-Koni's narrative desert. In *Gold Dust*, the threat concerns the camel, and it materializes in Ukhayyad's sleep, as the Bedouin dreams of the animal drowning in a flood. Thus, the death that Asouf's mother succumbs to in *The Bleeding of the Stone* also threatens the animal co-protagonist of the story in *Gold Dust*.

The context in which the dream occurs makes the whole episode particularly significant, as it further points to the connection between death by drowning – or even simply fear of it – and resistance. Ukhayyad falls asleep beside a sacred shrine, which features the image of a god. While “the god's right eye and cheek had been devoured by a millennium of dust and sand blown by the hot southern wind [...] the left side, in contrast, still bore testimony to the sad history of the desert.” (*Gold Dust* 29) Not only does resistance to oblivion and annihilation again materialize in the Cyclopean eye of Rumiz's narrative island, but also the threat here takes the shape of the sand and the water at the same time. While the nightmare of the camel's death by flooding torments the Bedouin's sleep, the ancient shrine resists against erosion. In this whole narrative passage, then, water and sand are again complementary in their necessary, and



at the same time threatening, co-presence. It is not water *per se*, in other words, that frightens. Rather, both water and sand are somehow menacing, as the sea and the desert alike always threaten to erase traces left on their surfaces. At the same time, however, the risk of disappearing is what ultimately activates, in all the Mediterranean narratives I have focused on, both physical and narrative resistance.<sup>19</sup>

The death of Asouf's mother seems sacrificial, so that the whole episode also anticipates, and paves the way to Asouf's final sacrifice, whose meaning I will come back to later. As "water grants life to the desert, just as it had granted death to his old mother," (*The Bleeding* 70) Asouf witnesses new vegetation growing on the land, which regenerates after the previous years of drought. Here Al-Koni depicts again the whole space of the desert as an ecosystem in itself, where the life cycles of humans, animals, and landscape are interdependent. However, Al-Koni's narrative cannot help but highlight the precariousness of this ecosystem, where the narrative space of the desert is again both threatening and threatened at the same time. A further and implacable drought follows the sudden flooding, and this time even the "black and luminous eye" (*The Bleeding* 71) of the goat, the ultimate symbol of a Cyclopean resistance, seems to vanish. The whole desert plain gets "strewn with the bodies of goats," (*The Bleeding* 71) so that Al-Koni's Sahara becomes a parallel "Mediterranean cemetery," in its resemblance to the contemporary space of a Mediterranean Sea filled with migrants' dead bodies. In the desert space, as in the space of the sea, humans and animals alike are under a constant threat; a threat that needs to be narrated in order to be also possibly challenged.

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<sup>19</sup> This threat is, once again, only apparent, and can be reversed within the very space of the desert. Fazal Sheikh's photographic work *Desert Bloom*, which traces the consequences of Ben Gurion's (in)famous dream of settling the Negev, shows how the desert can still bear testimony to human interventions on its own landscape, thus also preserving memories that would be otherwise irremediably lost. "Viewed through the lens of Sheikh's camera the desert comes to us as a kind of archive of what has happened on its shifting surfaces, of what is hidden and sealed within its dunes, of all the efforts to use it to erase the traces of this long, often contradictory and violent history." (<http://www.fazalsheikh.org/projects/desert-bloom.html>)

### A Reconfigured Desert's Community

The threats that, within peculiar circumstances and with different outcomes, hang over Asouf, his mother, and Ukhayyad, come from within the desert's space. As we have seen, these threats are related to the fragile balance between lack and excess of water, which affects the whole life in the desert, in its co-existence of humans, animals and nature. At the same time, these threats do retain a positive value, as the condition of risk they imply activates the kind of resistance that is necessary to negotiate a new form of balance. In other words, any constructive form of negotiation in Al-Koni's narrative desert relies on the potentiality of risk, intended, as Karen Pinkus suggests, as "not only mere 'danger' [...] but also that which saves." (Pinkus 74)

In Al-Koni's narrative desert, however, there are also tangible threats that seem to come to the desert from the space that lies outside its geographical, and geopolitical, borders, and that can only disrupt the desert's life, erasing any possibility of a renewed adjustment. These outside threats, which are as insistent and urgent as the inside ones, always take a human shape. At the very beginning of *The Bleeding of the Stone*, the people who arrive in the desert to worship the ancient stones are "foreigners," in Cain's words, who have come from beyond the sea. Thus, Al-Koni seems at first to re-propose a North/South dichotomy within the whole space of the Mediterranean. If the Sahara desert, which lies below the coastal boundaries of the Mediterranean Sea, is a reassuring Mediterranean space for the people who inhabit it, the sea is, on the contrary, fearful and menacing. From Cain's perspective, the North/South divide also assumes a religious connotation. If Cain is Muslim, and Asouf immediately identifies him as such, the masses of tourists who "invade" the desert to look at the sacred paintings are not only European, but also Christians. Moreover, these Christian foreigners whom Asouf is supposed to guide inevitably bring with them the specters of colonialism, as Cain makes clear in his first

meeting with Asouf, while explaining his disinterest in the ancient rocks: “We are sights ourselves, don’t you know that? People seek us out [...] The westerners come from beyond the seas to look at us and see how we live. Have you ever seen a sight interested in other sights?” (*The Bleeding* 12-13) In the whole passage, the binary opposition between Christians and Muslims, Westerners and Arabs could not be emphasized more, where Cain clearly denounces the condition of (formerly) colonized people as mere objects of the colonizers’ gaze.

However, it is necessary to note that the whole passage is narrated from Cain’s point of view, and that the distinction between the two poles gets much more subtle, and significantly blurred, over the course of the story, where Cain himself gradually becomes Asouf’s main antagonist. Moreover, in Al-Koni’s whole literary world the term “foreigner” does not necessarily apply only to Western people coming from the North. In *Gold Dust*, for instance, the danger (which will ultimately lead to the protagonist’s tragic end) comes from a rich merchant from the southern desert who still counts as a foreigner, since he belongs to a different tribe. It is at this time of the novel that, not by chance, Ukhayyad feels trapped in the Hamada desert, as “from the North, Italians sought to rush in, and from the South the tribes of Air sought to violate its pristine wastes.” (*Gold Dust* 151) From this perspective, then, North and South get closer to each other, as they both seem to pose a threat on the space that lies between them.

However, this in-between space of the desert that Al-Koni’s characters inhabit, and that the writer himself creates in his own narrative, does not need to be conceived as either an empty space or a barrier. Similarly to the Mediterranean Sea that Prosa, Moghrabi, Rumiz, and Sedira all narrate, the Sahara does not simply divide the north and the south of a supposedly dualistic Mediterranean, but can rather become a bridge between the two spaces. As Ahmida points out in his study of the (too often dismissed) impact of the Sahara trade, re-imagining the Sahara itself as a bridge can be a way to “rethink the history of colonial and nationalist categories and

analyses of modern Africa.” (Ahmida 2) The shift in the common imaginary of the Sahara desert that Ahmida suggests could also, I would add, help rethink the Mediterranean as a whole, beyond Africa, starting again from the very space of the Mediterranean Sea, in order to challenge the north/south divide it supposedly entails. If, as Ahmida underlines, the Sahara functions as a barrier in modern academic scholarship, so that North Africa is included in Mediterranean Studies while Sub-Sahara Africa is the object of African Studies, then both North Africa and the Sahara could participate in a renewed Mediterranean Studies field that would restore the link between the sea and the desert. Al-Koni’s narrative construction of the desert as an in-between space is again crucial in this sense, as it reaffirms its parallelism with the space of the sea, while also making it a potential space of resistance to both internal and external threats.

The external threats seem, then, the real danger that Al-Koni’s narrative desert needs to address. However, these threats are, in the end, only apparently coming from the outside, while they always condense in the figure of the human being, regardless of its foreign or local origin. It is not by chance that the whole story in *The Bleeding of the Stone*, despite its continuous flashbacks and side paths, still tends towards the final conflict between Asouf and Cain, where the latter embodies the mortal threat the former needs to face. If, then, the threat ultimately materializes within the very space of the narrative desert the writer creates, any challenge to it also needs to arise from within, and to imply a re-configuration of the desert’s space itself. Through the figure of the protagonist, the whole novel ultimately envisions a community that relies on nuanced boundaries between humans and non-humans, as well as between life and death; and in the Mediterranean space of the desert can this community be realized.

The specific kind of community Asouf imagines, and which he ultimately sacrifices his life to in an extreme gesture of resistance, emerges slowly throughout the novel, as the young

Bedouin develops his own conception of it in contrast with his father's view of inter-human, and human-animal, relationships. According to Asouf's father, man in general is the "greatest disaster on earth," (*The Bleeding* 21) precisely because, as the old Bedouin explains to his son, man has come to destroy the delicate balance that gazelles and waddan have reached within the desert's space. Thus, in Asouf's father's thoughts human and animal realms are absolutely separate, and opposite to each other. Moreover, since man is the only one responsible for the endless threat to Bedouins' life and their environment, the fate of the desert is for him a fate of isolation, although it is clear in the novel that this is a destiny he has deliberately chosen for himself. Solitude and isolation from other people are, in his view, the only way to avoid the traps of evil. However, this isolation ends up having its own price. As we have seen, in order to prevent his family from starvation, Asouf's father had to kill the waddan, thus breaking the vow he made. Thus, if the death of Asouf's father, caused by the waddan himself, is undoubtedly a consequence of the man's disregard for his own vow, it also seems to suggest that the choice of absolute isolation might not be the most appropriate.

Asouf also enters the story as a very solitary, even anti-social, figure. In the first scene of the novel, while looking after his herd, he cannot conceal his discomfort, as well as his amazement, at the groups of tourists that visit the wadi every day. He is also apparently known as a solitary person outside of his own oasis, since Cain, on their first encounter, refers to him as "the one who's happier living in an empty desert than being with other people." (*The Bleeding* 12) Cain interprets Asouf's vegetarianism as a further sign of his isolation from other people: "If you don't eat meat, then you have to live apart from other people. I see now why you've chosen to live in this empty wilderness. If a man doesn't eat meat, then he doesn't live. You're not alive at all. You're dead." (*The Bleeding* 14) In Cain's view, there are only two opposite sides of the spectrum: either a man lives apart from other men in complete solitude, or

he lives with other people, in a form of human sociality that involves – or is even based on – sharing meat. As Weisberg notes, applying Agamben's idea of "the open" to Al-Koni's hybridizing of the human and the animal categories, "Cain is trapped in what Agamben would call 'the anthropological machine' of separation and distinction," (Weisberg 56) as he does not envision any form of sociality that would go beyond the limits of the human.

Asouf, on the contrary, inhabits the liminal space of a desert that is far from being empty, and where bonds between humans and animals might be stronger than those among humans.<sup>20</sup> Asouf's relationship with other beings blurs the boundaries between the two opposite intransigencies that Cain and Asouf's father embody. The young Bedouin rejects Cain's conception of human life in the desert as constantly opposed to animal life, while also questioning his father's complete isolation. As Sharif Elmusa remarks, Asouf's condition gets immediately problematic: "While [his] standing apart morally is understandable as rebellion against the prevailing power, it is problematic in opposition to [his] own community [...] Does Al-Koni believe that humans cannot develop strong simultaneous bonds with their kinds, and with animals or nature in general? [...] Does solitude engender a kind of inner, happy state of nature?" (Elmusa 29-30) Through his own fight with the waddan, Asouf learns how, living in the same world of the desert, men and animals share the same threats and expose each other to their own lacks, to the extent that they can end up living in a sort of symbiosis, and become interchangeable.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in line with Roberto Esposito's etymological re-conceptualization of

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<sup>20</sup> If Asouf's behavior surprises Cain, in *Gold Dust* the community in which Ukhayyad lives also reacts with surprise, curiosity and a sort of pity while witnessing the strong bond between the young Bedouin and his camel. This reaction shows that there is a gap between the old and the younger generation, gap that in *The Bleeding of the Stone* mainly concerns Asouf and his father.

<sup>21</sup> This occurs in the last scene of the novel, at the moment of Asouf's sacrificial death to which I will come back later. But this is also what happens at the beginning of *Gold Dust* between the two protagonists of the story, the young Ukhayyad and his piebald camel: "The two thoroughbreds moved in unison, their approach slow and balanced. Ukhayyad felt that he was flying on wings in the air, his heart nearly bursting from the enchantment, anxiety and the hidden joy of the moment. Possessed by the music, he lived as hostage to the dance, its passion,

the meaning of the term “community,” the community Asouf strives to realize in the desert can only be intended as lack, impropriety, and gift, as the only way to live “in common.”<sup>22</sup>

The epigraph from the *Quran* that opens the novel already provides a hint of the significance of Asouf’s ideal of a human-animal community, as it states that “there are no animals on land or birds flying on their wings, but are communities like your own.” (*The Bleeding* 1) The boundaries of this community are, once again, blurred and undefined. Men and animals share the space of the desert not because they possess it, or because they belong to it, but rather because they simply co-exist in it “in their common non-belonging.” (Esposito 7) As the human, animal, and natural realms do not exist separately, but only in their reciprocal interaction, they also continuously dialogue with each other in the narrative space of Al-Koni’s desert. Here, as in the narrative space of Rumiz’s island, the movement of the narrative itself is sustained by the coming together of different voices, which are able to establish ways of communication beyond the means of human language. If news and rumors within the desert spread through the voice of the winds – in the same way as, in Rumiz’s narrative, stories carried by the winds travel across the Mediterranean Sea – (and the desert, as we have already seen, does express itself within the novel through the consistent occurrence of gnomic sentences), animals also participate in the narrative voice of the novel. They mostly communicate with the Bedouin protagonist through their eyes, “which conversed in a thousand languages, spoke with a thousand tongues, without ever making a sound.”<sup>23</sup> (*The Bleeding* 79) As in the works I analyzed in the previous chapters, here too the narrative is ultimately polyphonic, created by the interaction of multiple sounds and languages, where also, as in Moghrabi’s novel, the

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and mysterious longing. He guessed that the magnificent piebald shared these same wrenching sensations as they went along to the circle, though he could not say how.” (*Gold Dust* 10)

<sup>22</sup> See Esposito 2010.

<sup>23</sup> This form of communication between humans and animals applies only to Asouf. While hunting a gazelle, Cain realizes how the animal is trying to tell him something, but to his ears it speaks an unknown language, and he feels “awe, and fear too”, struck by the impossibility of communication. (*The Bleeding* 116)

definitiveness of the written word still bears the hallmarks of its oral dimension.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the polyphony of the desert's narrative reveals how there can be no unity in the space of the desert, as there is no unity in the whole Mediterranean space. If, in Colla's words, Al-Koni's texts are "unique documents that attempt to comprehend the Saharan world as a totality," (Colla 189) this totality of the desert, I argue, can ultimately only come out of difference and movement.<sup>25</sup>

As I already mentioned, Al-Koni's conception of the desert's community progressively emerges throughout *The Bleeding of the Stone* in parallel with Asouf's own evolution, as the Bedouin gradually develops awareness of his own position within the desert's space he inhabits. It is interesting to note that a similar evolution also concerns the meaning of the Bedouin's name in Tamasheq language, where, as Samatar explains, "the term *asouf* changes from a space of psychological displacement, a wild region of isolation and suffering, to a site of cultural emplacement, a focal point from which to advocate for the protection of endangered spaces and an endangered way of life" (Samatar 162).<sup>26</sup> The shift in the meaning of the Tamasheq word "asouf" significantly reflects, in the narrative development of the novel, the shift from Asouf's father's attempted, but ultimately failed, community, and the one Asouf himself conceives. The young "ecological Bedouin," as Elmusa defines him,<sup>27</sup> moves from the initial unawareness of

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<sup>24</sup> In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, orality retains a fundamental dimension, as it emerges, for instance, in the people of the oasis' stories (through which a few shorts chapters are narrated) or through Asouf's father's sayings, which get retold in direct speech.

<sup>25</sup> Significantly, Al-Koni draws a distinction between a positive, affirmative kind of movement, and movement intended as forced migration. In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, there is a chapter narrated from the gazelle's point of view, where the animal states her decision not to move away from the desert's plain, even after all the other gazelles have migrated in order to flee the evil of man. In this case, staying is itself a form of resistance, as the gazelle acknowledges that "there was no life for a migrant in alien lands." (*The Bleeding* 101) When, in other words, migration is forced upon oneself, and the lands of immigration are made alien, movement itself can become a form of alienation.

<sup>26</sup> Sofia Samatar's interpretation of the term relies on Susan Rasmussen's essay, which is specifically dedicated to the concept of *Essuf* in the Tuareg tradition. See Rasmussen 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Sharif Elmusa's conception of the "ecological Bedouin" is, in the scholar's own "a take on the 'Ecological Indian', (the Native American in unison with Nature)," and it describes a character "with an ecological core manifested in his rootedness in the desert; respect that borders on reverence for its history, memory, and unique



any danger, in which he nonetheless feels the threat of men and is “disturbed for reasons he couldn’t fathom,” (*The Bleeding* 16) to a conscious understanding of the risks faced by his land and his desert community.

At the moment of his father’s death, Asouf “had no knowledge of people’s natures, of their character or behavior. How could he have, when he’d passed his whole life remote and apart from them, when he was afraid of them? His sense of helplessness reduced him to panic.” (*The Bleeding* 27) His father’s position, that of “a desert man [who] doesn’t understand the wiles of men,” (*The Bleeding* 17) fails however to provide an adequate answer to the needs of his own community, a community that can be interpreted in Nancy’s terms as a “being in common,” “no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this (narcissistic) ‘lack of identity.’” (Nancy xxxviii)<sup>28</sup> The inoperative community of Asouf’s father, which “cannot be presupposed,” but “only exposed,” (Nancy xxxix) a “community of singularities” not necessarily “limited to men” but likely including also the animal, that does not impose bonds upon his subjects, that is not pre-determined but somehow just happens, does not appropriately engage, in the end, with the threats that the outside world poses to it, and is thus destined to fail. A similar destiny awaits the Bedouin Ukhayyad in *Gold Dust*, as he tries to build his own world apart from other people, and decides to live by himself with the camel as his only companion. Although this enclosed community appears at first as a sort of paradise, it cannot last long, precisely because its boundaries cannot be made impermeable to the outside world. As soon as another man crosses the fragile line that separates Ukhayyad and his camel from the rest of the world, the dream fades, the paradise

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places; affinity with the wild animals for their intrinsic value, although he may hunt them out of necessity; and an overall sense of responsibility and caring for his natural environment, which he does not think of as a separate entity, like moderns do” (18-9).

<sup>28</sup> In Nancy’s terms, community is not a substance, not a “single” thing, but is a matter of existence, a form of being with the other, and an experience that reveals one’s own existence outside oneself. As such, Nancy’s community is not on operative project, it is not even a project, is not a matter of producing, but a matter of “incompleting its sharing” (35).

melts away and the illusion is revealed for what it is. As Al-Koni ultimately suggests, escape and separation are not a feasible solution: life, in the desert as beyond it, requires stronger commitments and sacrifices.

In his gradual evolution, then, Asouf moves a step forward compared to his father, whose fate condemned him, after the death of the waddan and until his own death, to increasing isolation and despair. Helpless, unable to make sense of the cruelty of the desert but also completely alone, having lost the link with his people and thus with himself, the father represents a warning for Asouf. If the young Bedouin weeps while listening to the mournful *muwwals* sung by his father, these very tears testify to his reaction against their “strange life in the desert, where nothing else seemed to exist in the world.” (*The Bleeding* 36) Hence, Asouf understands that a narrow and circumscribed world does not suffice, and cannot survive. Patience, which is the supreme virtue his father taught him, might not be enough – as Asouf realizes while struggling against the waddan – if one does not make further efforts and take risks. It is significant that a quotation from Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* opens the chapter that comes right after Asouf’s struggle with the waddan. If up to this moment he might seem to have been following the same pattern as his father’s, a split is now undeniable. The same generational conflict also drives Ukhayyad apart from his father, as the old man neither understands nor approves of his son’s relationship with the camel. In both novels, then, the young protagonist is ultimately able to overcome the narrowness of the previous generation’s conception of desert life, and to open it to new possibilities for the future.

Through the protagonist, who moves from innocence to the awareness of his own responsibility to the world as a whole, Al-Koni also expresses his environmental concerns. By putting pressure on Western dualism between humanity and nature – or culture and nature –, the writer consciously replaces the anthropocentric view of nature with an eco-centric one.

Asouf is not anti-social, but he cares about a different sociality, based on reciprocal respect and interaction with the surrounding environment. When, against his own will, he needs to respond to the risks brought about by “a devil called man,” (*The Bleeding* 21) which materializes in the figure of Cain, he is not afraid anymore, and he is ready to face the extreme challenges posed by him. If, as Fredric Jameson remarks in his *Archaeologies of the Futures*, any utopia is always a political gesture, based on a dialectic between identity and difference and a way to imagine an alternative system from the current one, then Al-Koni’s view is not disengaged, and his conception of the desert, and of the world beyond it, is not just a symbolic one; on the contrary, it is a call for – and a way to think about – alternatives. At the same time, Jameson also argues that in the peripheries the real manifests itself better, to the extent that margins should not be intended as “spatial deserts in which no production is to be done or money made.” (Jameson 474) The Sahara desert, which is often looked at as a margin from a Northern European perspective on the Mediterranean space, is not “a desert.” It is not, as we have seen, an example of Nancy’s inoperative community, but it is rather an (endangered) ecological space where the potentiality of risk allows for alternatives to be imagined.

#### Asouf’s Final Sacrifice

The complex narrative time of *The Bleeding of the Stone*, in which the main, and present-time, story develops through the continuous flashbacks that interrupt it, allows the reader to follow the double path of Asouf’s own evolution. While the insistent reoccurrence of the past illuminates Asouf’s progressive divergence from his father’s trajectory, the present-time story develops through Asouf’s gradual opposition to Cain, which culminates in the dramatic ending of the novel. Unable to get Asouf’s help in hunting and killing the waddan, Cain falls in a state of physical and mental sickness, which obfuscates his mind. Cain’s sickness, which ultimately

leads him to slaughter Asouf in whom he sees the waddan<sup>29</sup>, derives precisely from the impossibility to satisfy his meat hunger, after having killed all the gazelles. The actual difficulty of finding meat in the desert gives Al-Koni the chance to highlight, in opposition to Cain's selfish and unnatural appetite, the cooperative and communitarian effort of the people of the oasis, who "pool their money to buy a goat or a lamb, which would then be cut into small portions and divided among the families who'd contributed." (*The Bleeding* 128) Thus, respect for the community in which one lives does not pass necessarily through Asouf's vegetarianism, but it is ultimately a compromise between human and non-human needs. The co-dependency of the species is an inescapable reality of the desert itself, which also explains why Al-Koni's narrative constantly erases any sharp distinction between humans and animals.

What does the final death of Asouf, then, the "ecological character" of the novel, mean? How should his final sacrifice, in particular, be interpreted? Is it the signal of a defeat similar to that of his father before him? Unlike his father, however, Asouf acknowledges and faces the assault of modernity, the danger that globalization represents for the sustainable human-animal relationship that is at the core of Tuareg's life. Hence, his death cannot simply be seen, in Susan Mchugh's terms, as a way of "positively embracing 'non-existence' as an alternative to capitulating to the insatiable appetites peculiar to settled life." (Mchugh 299) Rather, Asouf's sacrifice is also a way of delineating an alternative path between the sterile dialectic of surrender to globalization and attachment to tribal traditions. Asouf's counter-position is a claim for a different modernity, based on the suggestion of a relationality with the other, human and non-human alike. In this sense, Asouf's death is by no means an end in itself, but an extreme gesture that opens up new possibilities for the future.

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<sup>29</sup> Or who actually is the waddan, since here and in many Al-Koni's novel there are "identification and continuity between the human and the animal." (Elmarsafy 194)

While sacrifice is a common feature of religious practice, it does not necessarily have a universal identity, but rather, it has different meanings in different contexts. In order to understand what kind of ultimate form of resistance Asouf is putting in place within Al-Koni's narrative desert, it is important to grasp the meaning of the sacrificial act that we witness at the end of *The Bleeding of the Stone*. Cain is the person who sacrifices, and his figure undoubtedly belongs to the sphere of religion, as his name clearly recalls the story of Adam's two sons, which appears both in the Bible and in the Quran. However, Cain does not completely fit into the logic of sacrifice. As John Milbank explains in his study of the theories of sacrifice, sacrifice implies both violence and gift.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, a sacrifice cannot be, by definition, meaningless. Conceived either as a gift to the gods or as a ritual purification of the society, it has either a religious value or a social and ethical connotation. In Cain's act, however, there is no gift, and violence is not intended to obtain anything from the gods. Cain kills Asouf because this is the only way for him to somehow fulfill his own insane appetite. In Cain's case, then, sacrifice appears at first to be meaningless, since it has no ethic or social aim except for that of personal fulfillment.

However, the sacrifice that Cain performs does have a strong meaning from the point of view of the person being sacrificed. This does not mean that Asouf must necessarily be seen as a martyr, a defenseless creature in the hands of a murderer. Is he simply a passive victim, or is he rather putting agency in his own death? By embracing a self-identification with the waddan, Asouf shares the divine connotation of the animal. In a way, it is as if the deity itself is being sacrificed.<sup>31</sup> From this perspective, Elmusa interprets the Bedouin's crucifixion in strictly Christological terms, as resembling that of Christ, which "might no signal the end, and is to be

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<sup>30</sup> See Milbank 1995.

<sup>31</sup> The moufflon, which is another name for the waddan, is described in the same terms in *Gold Dust*: "the animal is no earthly creature, but something divine, more like an angel or emissary. Yes – the moufflon, like the piebald, was a messenger sent from high. Divine messengers such as these are so very rare!" (157)

followed by resurrection.” (Elmusa 29) As Hubert and Mauss asserted in their crucial study of the function of sacrifice, Jesus’ sacrifice is an absolute, irrevocable self-renunciation, by which the individual sacrifices himself for the redemption of the whole humankind. As such, it is opposed to the traditional form of sacrifice as *do ut des*, which implies a combination of self-interest and self-abnegation.<sup>32</sup> Asouf’s self-abnegation, however, does retain a form of “interest.” By accepting, and embracing, his own sacrifice, Asouf embodies his belief in a sacred communion between humans and animals.<sup>33</sup> Not by chance, he merges with the body of the sacred waddan painted on the rock to which Cain has tied him, covering the rock with his own blood.<sup>34</sup>

The Christian perspective, then, pertains more to Cain, who does not only stand in front of Asouf’s “crucified body,” (*The Bleeding* 132) completely satisfied with his own “sacrificial animal,” (*The Bleeding* 133) but also shows sarcasm towards his victim, challenging Asouf to free himself in order to prove his divine nature, as in the Christian account of the Passion of Jesus. On the contrary, Asouf refuses to identify with, and to give meaning to his own death from, a Christian teleological perspective. Rather, he embraces a different kind of religiosity, which might share some aspects of various religious beliefs, but does not coincide with any of them. In other words, by stressing the Christ-like scapegoat theme of Asouf’s death, one runs

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<sup>32</sup> See Hubert and Mauss 1899.

<sup>33</sup> Another sacrifice that occurs in *The Bleeding of the Stone* confirms this interpretation. A female gazelle sacrificed itself to save Cain’s life when he was a baby. In the words of the wise gazelle, “sacrifice knows nothing of bargains, and doesn’t look to the soul for which the sacrifice is made,” (102) but it also ratifies an eternal covenant between the man and the animal, established through a bond of blood.

<sup>34</sup> In Al-Koni’s novels, death seems to be meaningful only when there is blood involved, since only blood sanctions the communion between human and animal. As we have seen, when the waddan kills itself struggling against Asouf’s father, he does so by breaking his own neck. Then the waddan kills Asouf’s father in the same way: as I said before, there is no meaningful relationship established between the two. On the other hand, when this strong relationship occurs, as in the case of Ukhayyad and his camel in *Gold Dust*, it is ratified by blood mixing: “He stretched out over the camel’s back, gluing himself to the wet flesh. The red flesh was sticky to his touch, the blood not yet dry. Ukhayyad’s body, now also naked, fused with the viscous flesh of the Mahri. Flesh met flesh, blood mixed with blood. In the past they had been merely friends. Today, they had been joined a much stronger tie.” (47)

the risk of overestimating Cain's perspective, which may well be in contradiction with the kind of nuanced religiosity the author is putting forward in the novel.<sup>35</sup>

If Asouf's sacrifice can be seen as a performative act by which the young Bedouin acknowledges and further claims the intimate bond between humans and animals in his own community, Al-Koni's notion of sacrifice, then, resonates with Glissant's "poetics of relation," intended as a modern form of the sacred, a spirituality that is the "intuition of a relationship" to the world. (Glissant 19) It is important to note, in this sense, that there is no such distinction, in Tuareg's religion, between the sacred – conceived as an experience, or a perspective on the world – and the secular as it appears in Western thought. On the contrary, they are interrelated, or, even better, one gets confounded with the other, since, as Rasmussen notes in her study of Tuareg's religiosity, there is no exact translation, in the Tamasheq language, for the term "secular," and the closest approximation to it in Tuareg discourse is actually the term for Christian.<sup>36</sup>

At a broader level, it is Al-Koni's whole literary world that, again in Glissant's terms, "coming from a tradition, enters into Relation; defending a tradition, justifies Relation." (Glissant 93) Rooted in the geopolitical space of the Sahara desert, Al-Koni's work nonetheless portrays a world characterized by the endless crossing of borders between life and death, humans and animals, victims and perpetrators, sacrificers and sacrificed. In this way, Al-Koni's literary focus on the Sahara reaffirms the importance of the local, while also opening it to a global dimension. Al-Koni's desert does testify to the writer's bond with his own localized place of origin, but at the same time implies a movement towards a de-provincialization of the

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<sup>35</sup> Significantly enough, in the novel there are many references to a sort of religious syncretism. At the very beginning, Christians and Muslims are depicted as worshipping the same ancient rocks in the *wadi*, while, towards the end of the story, the American Captain John Parker shows his fascination with Sufism, described as closer to Buddhism than to Eastern Islam. Once again, in Al-Koni's world boundaries are blurred, both in social and in religious contexts.

<sup>36</sup> See Rasmussen 2007.

local space itself. As Samatar maintains, “Al-Koni’s concentration on remote desert regions [...] makes marginalized space the center of the world, and, more importantly, the center of the world-making: the place in which the idea of the world takes shape.” (Samatar 158) A margin and a center at the same time, Al-Koni’s narrative desert preserves its “difference” and resists assimilation, while also addressing broader issues concerning human relationality on a larger – Mediterranean and global – level.

#### Emily Nasrallah’s Mediterranean Desert of Movement and Resistance

I will close the chapter by opening Al-Koni’s narrative desert to a comparative analysis with a short story by the Lebanese writer Emily Nasrallah. The story resonates with specific aspects of Al-Koni’s narrative desert, while also reaffirming the parallelism, which sustains the whole chapter, between the sea and the desert within a shared Mediterranean space. The desert that emerges from the story is again an in-between space of suspension, where human boundaries blur, and where movement allows for resistance even beyond, or regardless of, the physical annihilation of death.

Nasrallah’s story *The Desert* belongs to a collection of short stories published in Arabic in 1984 under the title *Woman Through Seventeen Stories*. In this collection, the Lebanese writer explores women’s life through a variety of figures caught in different contexts.<sup>37</sup> Contrary to most of Nasrallah’s works, however, *Woman Through Seventeen Stories* does not explicitly deal with the condition of women within the constraints of the Arab (and Lebanese, more precisely) society, giving voice to their struggle for independence and self-expression.

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<sup>37</sup> I use here the Italian translation of the short story, which is included in a collection significantly entitled *L’Altro Mediterraneo. Antologia di Scrittori Arabi del Novecento* [*The Other Mediterranean. Anthology of Arab Writers of the Twentieth Century*], published in Italy in 2004. It is interesting to note that, as it was already the case with the Italian version of Moghrabi’s novel, here too the title highlights the Arab origin of the writers, and of the stories. Even more, the first part of the title explicitly addresses the Arab side of the Mediterranean as “other,” different from and somehow alien to the Northern, and more specifically Italian, side of it.



Rather, the stories focus on different women with no apparent common elements, in order to address a universal figure of woman, in the eternal quest for her own place in the world.<sup>38</sup>

In *The Desert*, the protagonist is a Bedouin woman who, while crossing the desert with her own tribe, is left behind, and struggles to resist the threats of immobility and death that the very space of the desert entails. Similarly to Al-Koni's, Nasrallah's desert is also a real and a metaphorical space at once, a specific place and, at the same time, a microcosm of the whole world. The journey that the woman undertakes within the space of the desert – and that covers the whole narrative space of the story – can quite obviously stand for a person's life path within the larger world, scattered with obstacles and challenges. However, Nasrallah's desert here does assume a very precise, and realistic, connotation, so that, in the end, it is “simultaneously an interior space of the mind, and an exterior space where travelers can visit and dwell.” (Jasper xii) The harshness of desert's life, which at the beginning of *The Bleeding of the Stone* materializes for the Bedouin Asouf in the implacability of the burning sun, strikes the woman here with similar fierceness. As “le vampate di calore salgono dalle dune di sabbia. Le leggere particelle di etere ardono,”<sup>39</sup> (Nasrallah 181) the desert enters the story in all its physical and urgent reality.

The first sentence of the story, moreover, immediately reveals the urgency of the desert's spatial and temporal determinacy: “Il mondo è un deserto. Il tempo è una sera. La sera di un giorno cocente di luglio.”<sup>40</sup> (Nasrallah 181) Through this incipit, the desert emerges as the whole world that circumscribes, and gives meaning to, the woman's life, while also posing her a threat in a distinct moment of the present time. Although it's already evening, the sun does not

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<sup>38</sup> The protagonists of the stories come from various backgrounds and have different experiences, either traveling around European capitals, or going back to their native village, or simply caught in their generational conflict with the maternal figure.

<sup>39</sup> “Hot flushes rise from the sand dunes. Light ether particles burn.”

<sup>40</sup> “The world is a desert. The time is an evening. The evening of a burning day of July.”

seem to reduce its inexorable assault, so that resting under the shade of a palm tree is the only escape the Bedouin can find – again, in a situation very similar to Asouf’s at the beginning of Al-Koni’s novel.

The exhaustion that overwhelms the woman under the desert heat makes her fall asleep immediately, and the condition of sleep suddenly annihilates the spatial and temporal coordinates of her presence in the desert. The very space of the desert, then, reveals itself again both as a threat and a possibility. The risks and challenges that it provides allow for the woman’s gesture of “un-securing,” creating the necessary space for her own resistance. Not by chance, during her sleep the Bedouin experiences the same state of suspension that Asouf has gone through in his fight with the waddan. Thus, the space the woman temporarily inhabits shares the same, unresolved liminality as Al-Koni’s *al-barzakh*, which undoes the dichotomy of life and death, extending the potentiality of the in-between time and space. Moreover, in Nasrallah’s story, this prolonged moment of suspension further develops into a condition of flying, where the woman, in her dream state, “è volata a lungo e lontano.”<sup>41</sup> (Nasrallah 182) We have already seen in the first chapter how the dimension of flying allows both Shauba, in Prosa’s play, and the women of the wind, in Moghrabi’s novel, to give voice to their narrative and physical effort of resistance against the threat of immobility and death. Here, it is significant that the threat immediately materializes again as the danger of falling down into the abyss. As Icarus’ tragic destiny, which Shauba alludes to in her own “folle volo” across the Mediterranean Sea, testifies to, flying is itself a liminal condition, whose uncertain outcome does not, however, annihilate the potentiality of the gesture.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “she flew for a long time, and went far away.”

<sup>42</sup> In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, right before Asouf’s ending sacrifice, Cain too dreams of flying high over the Hamada desert, riding on the waddan’s back. The dream, however, is much more sinister and threatening than the Bedouin’s dream in Nasrallah’s story. As in the episode of Asouf’s fight with the waddan, here Cain too suffers from thirst, but the desert gets only “flooded with mirage,” (129) deceiving him without satisfying his need. Also, as in the Bedouin’s case, the suspended condition of the dream does not last long. Whereas, however, falling back

The Bedouin in Nasrallah's story does fall down, but the abyss, in her case, does not coincide with her physical death. Rather, the end of her flight determines the end of her sleep, and vice versa, so that the woman falls back into the reality of her present condition,

“nell’abbandono, nel suo abbandono, nel deserto, nel deserto del suo smarrimento.”<sup>43</sup>

(Nasrallah 182) Having lost track of the caravan she was traveling with, the woman finds herself alone within a threatening desert's space that, in its disorienting dimension that does not provide hints of a trajectory, feels like a trap. In a way similar to Al-Koni, Nasrallah does not depict the desert as an idyllic and comforting space, not even for the people who live in it. It is a space, however, whose constant challenges create endless possibilities of agency, and where alternative conditions can be envisioned.

Mediterranean agency manifests itself, in the desert as already in the sea, through movement. Alternative narratives of the Mediterranean reveal how the immobility traditionally ascribed to a supposedly backward Mediterranean space is actually the most threatening dimension of Mediterranean life itself. Even after being saved by the waddan, Asouf has to make an extreme effort in order to reach his water, and to avoid dying of thirst. Suddenly pushed back into the harsh reality of her solitude in the desert, the Bedouin in Nasrallah's story faces a similar challenge, and she acknowledges the need to keep moving ahead, even without a linear trajectory to follow.

Movement is essential to survive, and also to change, to keep adjusting and readjusting to the surrounding space: “Meglio muoversi. È in grado di correre, saltare e fuggire. Se si muove può sperare di salvarsi. Se se ne starà ferma al suo posto il risultato sarà uno solo:

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into the present time allows the Bedouin to make a further effort of movement and resistance, Cain's dream does not seem to open into a further possibility. The narrative closes on the image of the man “plunging down into the pit,” (129) where his metaphorical death only preludes to the tragic sickness in which he becomes trapped.

<sup>43</sup> “in the abandonment, in her abandonment, in the desert, in the desert of her bewilderment.”

pietrificarsi.”<sup>44</sup> (Nasrallah 183) Within a desert’s space that reaffirms the co-existence and co-dependence of humans and animals, the Bedouin envisions her own movement in a way that recalls the agile gazelles of Al-Koni’s narrative. In this context, the frequent use of animal similes in the short story also assumes a specific meaning. In contrast with the insisting occurrence of these similes in colonial writing as a way to “ascribe an inferior status to people who are by extension treated ‘like’ animals,” (Wright 42) here they express a particular link with nature; a nature that is itself characterized by both horizontal and vertical movement, as the dimension of flying is again significantly stressed by the frequency of bird similes. Also, it is noteworthy that the threat of immobility becomes, in Nasrallah’s words, the danger of “solidifying.” Thus, the Sahara desert seems to share with the Mediterranean Sea a condition of liquidity that, without necessarily aligning itself with Bauman’s liquid modernity, can however still facilitate movement and change.

The conditions that witness, and also somewhat determine, the Bedouin’s journey also significantly resonate with Shauba’s and Rumiz’s narrative conditions of their Mediterranean journeys on the sea. In the desert, as on the sea, “la tenda della notte”<sup>45</sup> (Nasrallah 183) envelops the person who travels across it, covering with its darkness the whole expanse of land (as of water). Darkness itself, however, does not necessarily obtrude vision, but it can, rather, activate alternative ways of looking at things. The liquidity of Mediterranean expanses of land and water, then, does not imply flatness. On the contrary, frequent glitches – either dunes or waves – constantly interrupt the surfaces and disturb their apparent smoothness. Thus, both horizontal and vertical movement across physical and narrative Mediterranean spaces can ultimately restore the multi-layered dimension of these very spaces.

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<sup>44</sup> “It is better to move. She can run, jump, and flee. If she moves, she can hope to save herself. If she stands still, there will be only one result: she will petrify.”

<sup>45</sup> “the curtain of the night”

Determined to move in order not to surrender to the mortal danger of “petrification,” the Bedouin does not have in front of her a linear trajectory to follow, as she cannot discern the caravan’s trail. The only thing available to her is “il tracciato disegnato dalla sua mente [...] quel che rimane delle tracce immaginarie”<sup>46</sup> (Nasrallah 183) that she would follow guided by the winds. As in the case of Rumiz’s narrative island, whose supposed position at the center of the Mediterranean ultimately remains vague and uncertain, here the itinerary is somehow created by the narrative movement, – which in turn moves according to the rhythm of the winds –, and does not have any real cartographical reference. The Bedouin’s journey, which is again real and metaphorical, both determines and is determined by the woman’s mental and imaginary map, which does not in the end give any hint of her own position within the desert’s expanse. In this way, the Mediterranean spaces of the sea and the desert that these narratives create challenge any normative Mediterranean mapping. Nasrallah’s (and Al-Koni’s) narrative desert, as Rumiz’s narrative sea, refuse stable borders, expand indefinitely by virtue of their permeability and porosity, and reject ephemeral signs of demarcation and possession, always destined to be either covered by water or swept away by sand.

While the rhythm and the voice of the winds guide the Bedouin’s journey across the desert, smell also – “un profumo strano,”<sup>47</sup> (Nasrallah 182) – indicates the route, as the experience of the desert is a synesthetic experience. On his Mediterranean nights on the island, Rumiz is capable of hearing and viewing at the same time what he defines as “the long scream of light.” (Rumiz 14) Here too the desert activates all the senses and enhances the simultaneous occurrence of different ways of perception. It is not surprising, then, that even in the absolute solitude of the desert’s night the Bedouin’s voice blends with many other (in)visible and yet

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<sup>46</sup> “the route drawn by her mind [...] what is left of the imaginary tracks.”

<sup>47</sup> “a weird smell”

audible voices, where her singing “risponde all’eco di molti canti simili,”<sup>48</sup> (Nasrallah 184) further resisting any threat of silence and annihilation. The Bedouin’s journey, as the narrative of it, restores the polyphonic dimension of a desert’s space that can only be experienced – and narrated – through the multiplicity of its simultaneous voices.

If the desert, then, despite its own multi-sensorial dimension, is still able to provide a form of “assoluta quiete,”<sup>49</sup> which seems to momentarily soothe the Bedouin’s spirit, this condition is only temporarily static. It is a calm that, similarly to the dead calm of Rumiz’s narrative island, only preludes to a further change, a “restless calm” that still necessarily implies movement: “una quiete che la sfida [...] che si muove [...] rendendole possibile di valicare i tempi, i luoghi, tutte le barriere conosciute.”<sup>50</sup> (Nasrallah 184) In other words, it is a calm that requires an immediate reaction and that, by virtue of the very indeterminacy of the space that enhances it, allows for the imagining of further movement beyond predetermined borders. The apparent stillness of the Mediterranean desert, then, as the immobile movement of Rumiz’s Mediterranean island, does not translate into a reluctance to change. It is rather the call for a different kind (and pace) of change, in which movement can inscribe itself within the suspended calm, as the two conditions are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive.

Whether the Bedouin’s persistent movement of resistance is eventually sufficient, as in Asouf’s fight with the waddan, to save her own life, or if she is rather destined, like Shauba, to surrender to her physical death, the narrative does not reveal. Nasrallah’s narrative does reveal, however, that the risk of getting lost is tangible and oppressive, to the point that the woman

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<sup>48</sup> “responds to the echo of many similar songs.” The echoing of sounds, and more precisely of either laughs or screams, runs throughout the whole *Bleeding of the Stone*, where it appears alternatively as sinister and disquieting, or comforting and liberating. The occurrence of echoes is so insistent in the novel that, in the end, it seems to somehow perform the mysterious voice of the desert itself, where “sounds could deceive and delude,” (7) hiding their source and yet getting oppressive with their prolonged presence.

<sup>49</sup> “absolute quiet”

<sup>50</sup> “a quiet that challenges her [...] that moves [...] making possible for her to cross times, places, all the known barriers.”

seems to temporarily lose faith in the meaning of her journey: “E la sua carovana? Si sarà persa per sempre? Allora perché camminare? In base a quale promessa?”<sup>51</sup> (Nasrallah 185) Although her questions remain unanswered, the Bedouin’s gesture of resistance does not come to an end within the narrative space of the story, but rather keeps its potentially infinite dimension precisely by virtue of the narrative suspension that sustains it. “Ma lei continua a opporsi. Chi ha detto che lei si è rassegnata? I suoi piedi la trasportano, sprofondano nella morbida sabbia, si sollevano per poi penetrare nuovamente.”<sup>52</sup> (Nasrallah 186) As happened to Mahmud and Mahama in the last two plays of Prosa’s trilogy, here too the ultimate gesture of resistance translates into a further – and vertical this time – movement of appearing and disappearing, as the image of the Bedouin’s feet in and out of the desert’s sand suggests.

If Asouf’s final sacrifice, at the end of Al-Koni’s novel, testifies to his resistance to the threats posed to his own desert’s community, the Bedouin’s resistance in Nasrallah’s short story extends beyond the narrative space itself, suspended in a liminal condition that amplifies its own potentiality. Al-Koni’s and Nasrallah’s narrative desert allows for, and enhances, the characters’ different forms of resistance. The desert space that the writers narrate is both threatening and threatened, and, as such, calls for the imagining of alternative ways of living in it. It is definitely a local, and localized, space, whose physical characteristics mold its inhabitants, and whose harsh reality the writers do not mean to hide. At the same time, Al-Koni’s and Nasrallah’s Sahara is a space where global issues can be addressed, and from which the global world can be reimagined. Thus, the narrative desert that emerges through Al-Koni’s and Nasrallah’s works also embodies the possibility of a different world, whose boundaries

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<sup>51</sup> “And her caravan? Was it lost forever? If so, why even walk? According to which promise?”

<sup>52</sup> “But she keeps resisting. Who ever said that she has given up? Her feet carry her, they sink into the soft sand, they rise up and then they penetrate again.”

extend far beyond its geographical borders, as to also permeate the space of the sea, with which the desert shares its Mediterranean characteristics of movement and change. Through the alternative Mediterranean narratives of the sea and the desert that I have focused on in this work, the desert and the sea ultimately come together, and coexist, in a renewed and enlarged Mediterranean space that can be re-experienced, and reinvented.



## Conclusion

*I have never been anywhere so burdened with memories  
yet also so charged with possibilities for the future.*  
Hisham Matar, *The Return*

The narratives I focused on in this dissertation dialogue across the Mediterranean sea, drawing links among its different shores, and reaffirming the interdependence between land and sea itself within the whole Mediterranean space. Narratives of migration, of land and sea, and desert narratives, all ultimately create the Mediterranean as a space that constantly strives to resist the threats of globalization, while also pointing towards possible reconfigurations of the global world to which the Mediterranean itself belongs. It is a Mediterranean space that rests upon its own condition of liminality and suspension, so as to overcome normative dichotomies between north and south, east and west, local and global, and to reinforce the porosity and instability of its geographical and cultural borders. It is also a space that enhances the blurring of boundaries between the human and the non-human, as it constantly requires a shared effort of resistance to tangible threats of silence and immobility. It is, finally, a space that, in its terrestrial as well as in its aquatic configurations, relies on movement and adaptation.

This inherent Mediterranean condition of movement – which the structure of the dissertation itself highlights, in its own shift from movement across the sea, to movement between land and sea, to movement within the land – materializes, in all the narratives I analyzed, in the dimension of a journey. In Prosa's and Moghrabi's narratives, Shauba and Bahija respectively sustain their migratory passage across the Mediterranean Sea through their own narration of it. Although less explicitly focused on the migrants' experience, Sedira's video installations also address the possibility of a journey from one Mediterranean shore to the other; a possibility that the human protagonists of the video seem, in the end, only partially able to

realize. The protagonists of Al-Koni's desert novels also go through a rite of passage which, while ratifying their inextricable relationship with the animal, configures itself as a sort of journey, through which the young men become aware of their place within their own desert's communities. Finally, the Bedouin protagonist of Nasrallah's short story lives and narrates her open-ended journey across the suspended space of the desert, where the metaphorical and the real dimensions of the journey itself are inseparable from each other.

In other words, all the different protagonists – and narrators – of the various Mediterranean narratives I included in this work can be interpreted as post-modern Ulysses. Not only, as I already pointed out, do they all live and narrate their Mediterranean journeys at the same time, but they also voluntarily face the risks that these journeys imply, “un-harboring” themselves from the supposed safety of a condition of immobility. At the same time, it is interesting to note that, with the exception of Rumiz's and Al-Koni's cases, the other postmodern Ulysses are all women. While analyzing the various works, I did draw attention to the gender dimension of Prosa's play, Moghrabi's novel and Nasrallah's short story, and the peculiar declination that this dimension takes within Sedira's video art. However, the extent to which these Mediterranean narrative journeys subvert the gender roles of their Homeric archetype, and the particular meaning that this subversion acquires in the different works, is a field open to deeper investigation.

There is a further aspect of Ulysses' journey that the Mediterranean narratives included in this work cannot avoid addressing, while at the same time inevitably re-conceptualizing it. It is the problematic dimension of Ulysses' *nostos*, of the hero's protracted attempt to go back to Ithaca, which is ultimately what also enables his prolonged narrative journey. The possibility, or rather the impossibility of return, assumes a tragic connotation in Shauba's narrative, but it is also an empowering force behind Bahija's choices, as it allows her to keep looking ahead

towards her next destination. Rumiz does go back home at the end of his time on the island, but his city, projected onto the sea and associated with the image of the lighthouse, clearly appears as a natural extension of the island itself, a starting point for a new journey, rather than a landing site. In Sedira's *Saphir* and *Middle Sea*, the condition of return gets constantly alluded to, and yet never fully realized, in the space of the videos, where the moments of departure and arrival blend into one another, and finally coincide. For the Bedouins of Al-Koni's and Nasrallah's desert narratives, finally, return is an impossible, but not necessarily desired, achievement. If Asouf embraces a sacrificial act that sanctions his impossible return to the desert community of his father, in the short story there is no going back, as there is no starting point, and the only dimension that concerns the woman is the progressive condition of the journey itself.

Does, then, the ultimate impossibility of return add a further potential value to real and narrative journeys within the contemporary Mediterranean, projecting them into a possible future? The question, which I have already implicitly raised throughout the dissertation, cannot find a proper answer here. However, the question is certainly worth being further addressed, as the very issue of return assumes a particular connotation within the contemporary geo-political scenario of the Mediterranean. The interplay between Italy and Libya is still central in this respect, as the two nations "cooperate" in the forced return of "illegal" migrants to the African coast. At the same time, Libya itself was, under Gaddafi's regime, and still in the present political turmoil, a land of impossible return for its own citizens, exiled because of their political resistance. Moreover, it is necessary to remember how Italian colonial settlers in Italy were denied their return to the motherland after the end of the Italian colonial rule, trapped in a forced immobility until finally forced to return by Gaddafi's regime.

Is it still legitimate, then, or even desirable, to see a potentiality in the impossibility of a return that, in the contemporary Mediterranean, often coincides with coercion and denial? Once again, the space of the Mediterranean needs to deal with its own contradictions, and with the density of a past that keeps haunting its present. Only if it manages to acknowledge the apparent burden of its own memories, and to learn from them, while also regarding the permeability of its borders as a value, rather than with fear, can the Mediterranean space also build, in Matar's words, "possibilities for the future."

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